

FOCUS: SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) FOR ENGLISH LEARNER AND IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is causing much uncertainty for families, locally, nationally and globally. A common theme around the world is how the epidemic has exacerbated disparities in economic security and access to quality healthcare and education among historically underserved communities. This pandemic has hit during a time of intense anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, which has unfortunately been magnified for our Asian and Asian American community. We know that even before the epidemic, research shows that English Learners in California face many barriers to obtaining an equitable, high quality education and that the quest for equity for English Learners has been elusive. In a sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect storm that exacerbates the trauma and toxic stress that many English Learners face every day.

Teachers are at the heart of the matter when it comes to staying connected with their students to support continuity of learning during these challenging times. We are so indebted to teachers like Leslie Hiatt, and to all educators, for their dedication, heart and commitment to the students they serve.



The most important message from Leslie is about how vital it is to “make face-to-face connections” with each of her students. “Kids need to know that we’re still here for them and that along with high expectations for learning, that we love them.”

Leslie Hiatt is a fourth grade teacher at Bell Gardens Elementary School in the Montebello Unified School District (MUSD) near Los Angeles California. An accomplished teacher for over 37 years, Leslie’s commitment to social justice education with her students includes an impactful project involving the analysis of primary source materials as compared to the content of 5th grade history/social science textbooks, elucidating the lack of accuracy in representing diverse historical perspectives. The project engaged her students’ activism and advocacy, and resulted in the passage of a California state law to accurately portray 5th grade history in textbooks. Her dedication and commitment to community and her students is based on building relationships and close connections with her students, understanding and connecting with them holistically and with genuine care.

Insights on Social Emotional Learning

The most important insight after more than a week of learning is to attend first to students’ Social and Emotional Learning by avoiding the rigidity of a minute-by-minute daily schedule and, according to Leslie, “staying connected to each other every day.” 29 of Leslie’s 32 fourth graders, 42% of whom are English Learners, connect daily with Ms. Hiatt, largely as a result of Montebello USDs 1-1 computer initiative for grades 4-12. According to Leslie, the 3 newcomer students who are not able to stay connected via their school-issued laptops, have not been able to obtain internet access as of yet. However, Leslie calls each of them on their cell phones to check in with them.

After the first week, Leslie shifted her online teaching/learning routine from a tightly scheduled daily agenda and now checks in online 4 times per day, has moved to thematic instruction (as a best practice for English Learners) and uses many of the technology tools that keep her students engaged. She has whole class meetings, weekly small group book clubs and has tried to maintain the joy from her normal classroom routines with her students by helping them “make sense of their own learning collaboratively” online. Perhaps one of the most moving examples is from Gloria (pseudonym), a homeless student, who noticed that some of her newcomer classmates did not have the materials in Spanish, and independently translated for her peers. “She made me think right!” says Ms. Hiatt. This served as a reminder to continue to provide primary language support for her English Learners.