Duty of Care:
Realizing Belonging Access Justice Equity Diversity Inclusion in Our Classrooms and Communities

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Dedication

A member of the Ojibwe Red Lake Nation once gave me a dream catcher for protection—and as a reminder that we all are in process. The maker explained that they add a contrasting "mistake bead" to each dream catcher to remind us that we all make mistakes, but they provide opportunities for support and growth in each other's presence.

With much gratitude for this reminder, a big thank-you, Chi Miigwech!

Acknowledgments

Thank you, readers, leaders, and practitioners, for your passion to be changemakers daily.

Thank you to my students for teaching me what it means to teach and to learn with suspended judgment, with grace, in playful and unbiased ways.

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Thank you, Linda Crawford and Gary Crawford (1934–2023), for your gentle and loving guidance since 2000. Gary, your spirit is with me as I follow in your footsteps.

Foreword

This book arrives at a critical moment of disequilibrium for educational systems, offering readers a holistic approach to intentional implementation of integrated academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) practices. It provides a pedagogy, a practice, and a way of being with one another that fosters joyful learning environments for all learners—students and adults alike. It challenges educators, school leaders, and community members to examine how all-day, everyday teaching and learning in our schools can create more equitable outcomes. We *can* take care to create the conditions where all students can thrive.

Jitendrapal S. Kundan has masterfully woven together his educational journey, compelling research, thought-provoking ideas, and practical strategies to help our greater communities and the educators who serve them. The practices of mindfulness, compassion, and self-care modeled here continue to guide my own career as an educator.

This book delves into the concept of equity as viewed through the lens of positive psychology. It applies neuroscientific principles to recognize and value our students and their diverse cultures in relatable terms. By doing so, it takes a significant step toward making Belonging, Access, Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (BeAJEDI) a lived reality for our students, rather than merely theoretical concepts.

SEL policies and approaches are often implemented superficially in school systems and therefore are not robust enough to meet the needs of the students we serve. Educators and families recognize this. Research demonstrates that when students' needs are consistently met and their growth is supported incrementally, their mirror neurons will regulate their behavior. SEL is thus not only an educational strategy but a means to foster social and emotional well-being—but only when schools commit fully to its success.

Duty of Care considers a fresh perspective: Social-Emotional Education Equity (SEEE). SEEE is a daily practice designed to create affirming and validating learning experiences. The author outlines this approach necessitated on taking both personal and institutional responsibility for student success. His insights are focused on thoughtfully engaging and supporting both students and adults.

The intentional implementation of integrated academic and SEL practices represents a comprehensive approach to education. It emphasizes the importance of joy, care, and connection in the learning process. By recognizing students' cultures as assets and applying neuroscientific principles, educators can create a nurturing environment that supports the growth and well-being of all students. Through SEEE and other SEL strategies, schools can put theoretical concepts of equity and inclusion into practice, ensuring that every student feels valued and supported.

I'm blessed to have been a part of this journey. I am inspired by my colleague and friend, Jit, to do the work needed to create equitable classrooms—to do whatever it takes for our students, no matter what. May the stories, advice, and practices shared here inspire others to fulfill our Duty of Care as well.

Carolyn Rottman, M. Ed., Director, The Origins Program

About This Book

While this book focuses on educational settings, it's also intended to provide parents, caregivers, community leaders, and others who care about healthy child development and social justice with reflective tools for personal growth as well as the growth of the children around us. The better we understand ourselves, our motivations, our hot buttons, and our joys, the more effective we can be in all of our daily relationships, and the more satisfaction we can find in life.

As you go through the chapters, you'll see that this book is a combination of scholarly research, professional and personal anecdotes, and best practices. At the end of each section are reflective exercises and Brain Breaks to refresh you before you go on to the next section. You're encouraged to try them and adopt these tried and true activities for use in your own environments.

Because our work as educators is one of continuous improvement, I'm constantly engaging in self-examination. In my daily interactions with others' children, as well as my own children and grandchild, I strive to reduce my biased and prejudiced approaches as I help develop children under my watch. Do I present instructional methods and student engagement methods that reduce and/or eliminate prejudice and stereotyping in this book? Please let us know if the practices offered will help mitigate or end stereotyping and prejudice in your classrooms and homes; email us at DOC@originsonline.org. We look forward to hearing from you!

Introduction

We do not hope for no reason.

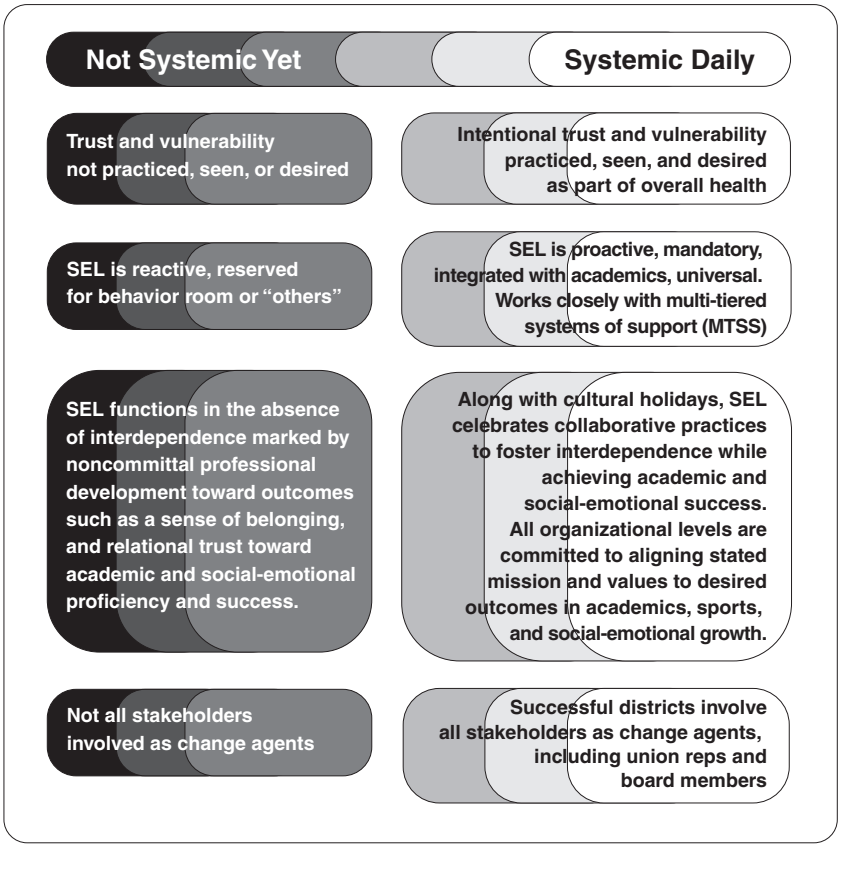
Hope is the reason for itself.

–Amanda Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry*

During consultation, coaching, speaking, or professional development sessions, I'm often asked questions like:

- How do schools manage to accomplish all the teaching of social-emotional learning (SEL), equitable practices and relationships, trauma-informed learning, and academic subjects?
- Is SEL another prep for our teachers, and how do teachers do it well?

Homes, schools, districts, teachers, before-school and after-school programs that get it right recognize that the goal is to consciously and systematically embed integrated academic and SEL practices in all they do. This holistic approach is, at its heart, a way of being with one another that builds resilience, enables academic growth, and fosters racial and gender equity in a framework of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). You're not an adversary; you're an ally to others—and yourself—as your work becomes systematic and systemic. Whether the system comprises a single classroom, a group of similar grades, a department, or an entire school district, I look for opportunities to help districts move from being "not systemic yet" to "being systemic daily."



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"Two Steps Behind," and the teacher responded, "No, I just barely got this! Maybe we can try that the next time you're here." I asked her to think about how her students would feel if she changed procedures without clearly explaining the rules and expectations. The teacher smiled and said, "Where I come from, I never had to explain this routine, but I get it. I tell students to pick the first card in the queue; no card shopping." I told her that I saw seven students card shopping instead of picking the first available card. I asked the teacher to describe what she noticed next. "They found their partners," she replied. I asked her why it mattered whether students shopped for their cards or picked the first one in the queue. It seemed more like a teacher problem than a student problem. They found their assigned partners and got to work on their task. In this example, the teacher's rigid adherence to one "right" way of completing a task caused her to miss how truly engaged the students were. They were learning and not harming the community or the class routine. After that conversation, the teacher was more relaxed and could see how her assumptions were diminishing her effectiveness. She decided that when the class returned the next day, she would explain that students should only take the first available card in the queue. Later that night I got an email from the teacher: "I thought about what you said. It's a teacher problem. Tomorrow I will clarify that students can choose any card, but they must take the one they touch." I answered, "Sounds good. Let me know how it goes." Another email arrived a week later, and the teacher was happy. The newly clarified routine was working. I asked her what made her happy, and she said that she asked her students how the random-choice partnerships were going. They told her that while she wasn't letting them pick their own partners, picking cards was still fun. I asked her what she thought would happen if she occasionally let students choose their own partners. She said, "Some will be left out. That's why I'm making these partnerships for them." "Bingo! Thank you!" I replied.

During the rest of the post-conference conversation, I asked the teacher what went well with her class, especially those seven students. After pausing, the teacher said, "I don't know." I offered to start with one example and then ask her to share an example. I observed that her closing routine for silent lineup showed her hard work. The routine was clear, and I could tell that she and her students felt proud of executing it so well. The teacher then shared that the prerecorded directions were working well for all: They heard them, they could replay them, and written instructions were included. I then asked what she noticed those seven students were doing while programming their bot. She said that they went further with programming than any class ever had. I asked her to elaborate, and she said the students were able to program their bots to cross over a bridge, go over a steep incline, and come out the other end. When it was my turn, I told her that I noticed the entire class cleaned up within the allotted time.

It was very clear to me that this teacher knows development, understands the human nature of school-age children, knows how to do good, wants to do good, and often does good, but she could not see a handful of kids as able because she had labeled them "disrespectful" based on an ambiguous set of directions. The teacher's thinking and doing had hardened from stereotyping or fear of losing control.

This case study asks us to consider how our bias can cause us to miss student contributions as well as growth and development opportunities. This rejection prevents us from seeing our students as able, competent, meaningful contributors. Instead, we see the labels of our biased assumptions and stereotypes.

Our duty of care then becomes moving from labels to ables.

As we've seen in this example, when learning routines, procedures, and norms are vague, they're laden with assumptions. We assume our students know how to partner or how to stand up to mistreatment. Then we respond the same way, based on conditioned, biased assumptions. The best intervention, then, becomes unlearning our biases and regularly sharing our own triumphs and struggles. Keep the questions simple. Identify what was easy this week and what was difficult. This can be content-specific or open-ended. The teacher also answers these two questions as part of their weekly workshares. After a few weeks of such workshare experiences, we go deeper by asking our students not only what was easy and what was a struggle, but why. This incremental step opens our windows of tolerance wide. Simultaneously, we experience a healthy dopamine loop at individual and group levels when we reflect on our goals, successes, or next steps toward successes. This deliberate, consistent practice gives voice and choice, resulting in an increase in motivation, while quashing false narratives of self and others. This practice also supports our efforts and perseverance during social, emotional, and cognitive tasks, making way for another dopamine loop. When we practice these skills, Belonging Access Justice Equity Diversity Inclusion are not just boxes we check, but how we naturally operate.

Portfolio schools engage their students in daily or weekly goal-setting, tracking, completion, and measurement so students reflect and learn about themselves in relation to new skill building, practice, refinement, deepening of previously learned skills, and planning for new learning. Over the course of my educational career, I've observed schools engaged in student-led portfolio conferences. The schools let their students decide which current and past work they want to add to their portfolios. This material forms the basis of discussion during parent-teacher-student conferences, which are led by students and supported by the evidence gathered in their own portfolios. Participating schools believe in developing student agency as the utmost priority, which increases student engagement and motivation without resorting to punishment and reward.

While some schools had seamless, effortless, and productive student-led portfolio conferences, others struggled. The time commitment made all the difference; those with a consistently practiced, yearlong routine reported fewer struggles compared to those whose conferences took place a few times per year. Event-based schools prepared for quarterly student-led conferences in which the teacher chose students' portfolio items. The teachers did most of the talking, with yes or no responses expected from the students.

Practice schools, on the other hand, had a regular weekly practice of workshare,

where students chose the work they would discuss, clearly describing whether the work was in progress, what progress they'd made, and if the assignment was finished. They would go on to say what they learned, strategies they used, what they struggled with, and their next steps. This weekly practice of meaningful workshares created a healthy dopamine release and provided opportunities for everyone to update unproductive and inaccurate narratives. It was a powerful experience to witness. I felt joyful observing the practice school on the day of their conferences. Each student led their conference entirely, explaining the work they chose and why they chose it—including their best and "not so best" pieces.

Weekly workshare can take place in any school—not just portfolio schools. Genuine workshare practices serve as an intervention for belonging, metacognition, bias reduction, self-determination, and inclusion to reduce student and educator burnout rates. They are BeAJEDI in action.

Self-reflection Questions

Does your school practice portfolio learning and/or student-led conferences? If not, why not? If so, what has been your experience of these practices?

Managing the Self

Self-control and self-regulation are not the same. Frequently we expect students to have self-control, to behave and engage in prosocial ways. Yet we don't recognize when their limbic system's automatic responses—faint, flee, fawn, fight, and freeze—present themselves. Once a student is displaying those reptilian brain responses, self-control without self-regulation is impossible, and failure to understand the differences between them is harmful to the communities we serve.

Activity in the prefrontal cortex guides us to inhibit or delay the impulses and emotions that live in and are part of the limbic system. Asking our students to have self-control is asking them to use an offline frontal cortex to override the active limbic system. When they're already in their limbic systems, no amount of hoping, wishing, planning sheets, or talking helps to get out of there. We must message differently to regulate the limbic system to get the whole brain back online. Messaging is through our calm co-regulation, as we offer an option such as movement, a snack, use of predetermined visual cues, or a look at the horizon. We need to remember that our students' brains are still developing. Relying solely on an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex to manage emotions makes self-regulation very difficult, if not impossible. We must continue to support our students as they develop self-regulation and self-control skills through practice.

Early in my career, when my students misbehaved or needed support with regulation, I thought they needed help with self-control. I bypassed self-regulation or tried to force self-regulation by creating "reflection sheets" on official school letterhead. I engaged in the "come to [your deity here] talks," the "scared straight" strategies. I called this preparing them for "the real world" or "the future" or encouraging

them to "act their age." On the surface, it seemed to be helping—but only for that moment. My students and their families always loved me. My requirements were rigorous. My approach was kind. My students would tell me they could trust me because I had soft eyes even when they made mistakes.

But those soft eyes didn't help any of them with self-regulation. I was talking to the shut-down or underdeveloped parts of my student's brains when they were dysregulated. It was only later in my career that I had the good fortune to take Dr. Bruce Perry's professional teachers development on trauma-informed practices to build resiliency, where I learned to develop self-regulation in my students through co-regulation strategies first. When the student becomes open through these strategies, they're ready to apply and practice self-regulation and self-control strategies—and with their dignity still intact. Trying to force our students' brains to think while they're in their limbic systems is setting up our students—and ourselves—for repeated failure and frustration.

When we view misbehavior through the lens of self-regulation rather than self-control, we're better positioned to recognize the difference between mischief and stress responses—an important distinction to make if we want to model self-regulation or self-control effectively.

Challenging academics, challenging classrooms, and a challenging internal state can push some students' brains into their limbic systems, and some students come to us already in that state. For academic and behavioral co-regulation, first make sure that you're regulated enough to support a brain that is dysregulated. I have seen many well-intentioned but dysregulated teachers whose attempts to mitigate situations end up exacerbating them; a dysregulated teacher inevitably dysregulates their students.

Neuroscience dictates that we tackle one goal at a time. I have seen the efficacy of laminated "calming time" passes for self-regulating students who need to step away from the group dynamic briefly. Students can opt to take a break by taking a calming pass on their own. This visual cue, which does not require anyone to talk, is a mediator and a system to keep our students in their windows of tolerance. Teachers who modeled the appropriate use of calming time passes reported that the pass system was not abused by their students.

As parents, teachers, principals, and coaches, our job is to continually remind ourselves that our work is hard but profoundly meaningful. It's hard to orchestrate learning for varied learning styles and student stamina from moment to moment, yet when we put our kids in charge of co-designing our spaces, we move toward being child centered, teaching the whole child, or what is now known as being "inclusive practitioners."