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# INTRODUCTION

*Before proceeding with anything new in your classroom, always ask yourself, what do the kids I teach need?*

—Tony Casipit  
Technology and Engineering Educator

As both a teacher and instructional coach, the most critical question I am trying to answer and help others answer is “What do the kids I teach need?” Because students and school contexts vary, so do the answers. They are unique—even for the same kid or groups of kids on a different day. I think “What do the kids I teach need?” should be the most urgent question both individual teachers and school-based teaching teams need to ponder and figure out to develop positive interpersonal relationships with their students and for making the instructional decisions necessary to help them blossom into better people and learners. Some might say that’s a tall task for educators, especially nowadays when many are teaching through trauma and crises in post-COVID classrooms (Mason, 2021). I can relate and empathize.

This book doesn’t shy away from the problematic issues teachers face in their classrooms. It was written to assist teachers in teaching post-pandemic learners and beyond using a research-informed framework for improving teaching using project-based learning (PBL) and helping them develop emotional intelligence (EQ) skills through social and emotional learning (SEL). On the one hand, PBL is a research-based instructional approach teachers can use to engage learners over an extended period to solve compelling problems they care about and acquire the skills and dispositions needed for successful lives. On the other hand, SEL is an educational approach designed to assist kids with developing their EQ skills to help anchor their learning process and decisions within school curricula. Both PBL and SEL are pedagogies that have been proven to meet the academic and social needs of students (Lucas Education Research [LER], 2021). I believe implementing PBL and SEL in post-COVID classrooms effectively can also have positive effects on educators too—the second part of this book therefore focuses on uplifting SEL competencies in our PBL teaching plans.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID ON TEACHERS

Before diving deeper into PBL and SEL, I want to acknowledge some of the problems facing our teachers and profession. Teaching post-COVID is difficult—the pandemic wreaked havoc on public education and exposed academic and social

inequities (Dorn et al., 2020), causing many to question and leave our profession (Kurtz, 2022). Results from a survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center are bleak and tell us the following (Kurtz, 2022):

- More than 40% of the teachers surveyed reported they were “likely to leave the profession in the next two years.”
- Only 44% reported they were “treated like professionals by the public.”
- Less than 15% reported they were “very satisfied with [their] jobs.”

Additionally, here are some of the challenges expressed by teachers in their own words from a survey by the Christensen Institute (2021):

- “Student behavior is a huge problem. I spend more time redirecting than presenting instruction. Many students have learned non-school practices that make it difficult to create a high functioning independent learning environment.”
- “I have students who need extra support for social-emotional learning. I don’t have enough resources and time to meet and talk with them.”
- “Most teachers feel like zombies just going through the motions of the day.”
- “The workload is unreal. The pressure on teachers during this time is more than ever before.” (pp. 14, 15)

After reading the abovementioned quotes, I cannot in good conscience overlook the plight of our teachers or not attempt to address some of their concerns in this book. Moreover, administrators need to rally teachers in ways that don’t seem disingenuous or have an agenda to have them comply. That said, school leaders must consider the best ways of supporting their teachers who are staying in the profession by choice and new colleagues entering a potentially tricky new job situation (Valenzuela, 2022f).

Systems were broken pre-pandemic (Barrington, 2022), and now our teachers know it and rightly refuse to be blamed. There are no easy answers, but for those remaining, we have to take better care of ourselves in and out of the schoolhouse. A silver lining of the pandemic is that it has ensured personal wellness is here to stay (Cal State East Bay, 2022); for many, it’s become an exigent priority. Managing our needs with those of students is a balance that all educators need to make consciously; otherwise, we may be leaving too much to chance in our lives and the classroom. Even individuals outside of education must manage their needs in tandem with those they serve (Ahmed, 2021). From business owners, accountants, lawyers, florists, designers, retail workers, family members, and everyone in between, it’s not easy but definitely worth exploring. The SEL-infused PBL methodology introduced in this book can help us put practice to that exploration.

## **MY DISCOVERY OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING**

I first became aware of PBL in 2013 when my colleagues on the curriculum and instruction (C&I) team at Richmond Public Schools, in Virginia, and I explored

the best teaching methods for hands-on learning in our district. Colleagues from another school system suggested we try our hand at PBL. Unfortunately, at that time, it was difficult to find local training or anyone who was grounded in the pedagogy of PBL, so our progress stalled momentarily. Later, in 2014, I attended the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) conference in Nashville, Tennessee. At the conference, I attended my first presentation on PBL and was introduced to the Buck Institute for Education, the then world leader for PBL methodology and resources. I left the ACTE conference inspired and wanting to learn how to implement PBL well in my school district. I requested my supervisor to allow me to attend PBL World—the nation’s premier annual PBL event hosted by the Buck Institute (PBLWorks, 2022). Although I didn’t make it to PBL World, I became accepted into the Buck Institute’s national faculty development program, where I learned PBL and how to implement it across various educational contexts.

Since 2014, I’ve spent most of the last decade touring the United States (30 states and 70+ cities), working with K–16 schools to help them understand and implement PBL across the curriculum. Part of the work is to coach educators through developing PBL units they can immediately implement in their classrooms. Through lots of travel, my PBL work opened my eyes to the instructional needs of teachers and how PBL can be used to boost their teaching in urban, rural, big-city, and small-town settings for multitudes of learners with diverse needs. This became glaring on my return visits to many schools and localities for follow-up support to the initial PBL training. Seeing countless teachers become more confident planners and practitioners in their classrooms and tangible artifacts evidencing student work increased my confidence in my coaching and strengthened my message to schools.

Data collection was, and continues to be, a significant part of this work because it helps inform and tweak practice. I have learned a lot from my participants—they are trusted partners often dictating how I plan and facilitate sessions. I have found that all teachers need a trusted set of pedagogical strategies supported by tools and frameworks at their disposal. They also need to confidently reach for those tools as students and times change—pivoting with ease, comfort, and knowing they are making instructional decisions that provide their students the proper support. In my own teaching evolution, I have gleaned insights from several practices and pedagogies. I don’t see PBL as the only way to teach. Instead, PBL can be a powerful approach when coupled with SEL and high-yielding strategies showing high influences on student achievement and engagement and applied correctly to define an empowering student experience.

## **WHY WE NEED A PBL+ FRAMEWORK**

Using data to inform my work with teachers is critical. It has informed me that for teachers to feel confident using PBL in their classroom, they need to understand what PBL is, learn ways to boost their learners’ EQ, know the students they serve, and adapt practical strategies for planning and facilitating PBL using strategies with high influences on student engagement and achievement.

The PBL+ Framework provides educators guidance for strengthening their PBL journey and refining their instructional practice over time. Each component of the framework is supported by research and is grounded in practical steps that are replicable in any classroom. The aim is to make PBL accessible for every

educator by providing them with strategies for getting started either independently or with colleagues—ideally, within a grade-level teaching team servicing the same students.

Moreover, the components in the framework consider that not all educators teach in districts where PBL training is readily available. Even when training is available, critical next steps and additional coaching required for improving practice may not be. To adequately support readers, each element in the framework has a dedicated chapter in the forthcoming pages explaining its relevance, research, and implementation strategies. Here are the elements in the framework:

1. Understand the components of research-informed PBL
2. Understand the basics of the CASEL 5 (for SEL) and emotional intelligence
3. Use knowledge of students to inform teaching
4. Design projects relevant to the students you serve
5. Use frequent feedback cycles to guide student work

## WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

This book is written for K–12 teachers who are looking to develop or enhance their teaching using PBL but may not have experience aligning PBL to SEL and other related strategies needed for making sound and calculated instructional decisions. That's where the PBL+ Framework can help. This book is also for instructional leaders looking to implement PBL across the curriculum in their schools using data-driven high-leverage and tangible steps that improve instruction. This book can be a manual for schools and educators looking to raise equity for vulnerable students by intentionally using PBL to activate SEL in projects but who may be unsure of where to start. Through lessons on the fundamentals of PBL, SEL, and other equity-raising practices, both the novice and expert can level up their PBL teaching by applying the contents in this book.

Whether you're an English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science, history, art, computer science, or career and technical education (CTE) teacher, this book provides the know-how for strategically engaging your learners in projects while still maintaining the appropriate rigor levels required for your class. This book is also for the special education support teacher and teacher tasked to hold after-school learning experiences. Although you can adapt the material in this book independently, you should do so as part of a school's collaborative teaching team. Whether you are teaching students in a support role, in an after-school club, or just as a fun activity, you will find strategies in this book to support you on your PBL- and SEL-infused teaching journey.

## HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS BOOK

This book is organized into three parts, each with three or more chapters.

Part 1 defines and explores the fundamentals of the PBL+ Framework and provides empirical evidence and many easy-to-replicate examples for its use as part of a comprehensive PBL teaching plan. Also, the intersection of educational equity, SEL, and sound teaching strategies is highlighted in these chapters

through research, tools and frameworks, and practical advice. The five elements in the framework (and Chapters 1 through 5, respectively) are as follows.

**Chapter 1, Element 1:** Understand the Components of Research-Informed Project-Based Learning. In this chapter, we consider pacing and teaching structure for projects. We explore relevant research and prepare to implement essential elements to strengthen project ideas and create the best learning experiences for students.

**Chapter 2, Element 2:** Understand the Basics of the CASEL 5 (for SEL) and Emotional Intelligence. In this chapter, we explore the SEL competencies of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and use tools to help kids develop emotional intelligence skills.

**Chapter 3, Element 3:** Use Knowledge of Students to Inform Teaching. In this chapter, we explore appropriate tools and methods to become better familiar with students so we can begin to make instructional decisions that accommodate their unique needs.

**Chapter 4, Element 4:** Design Projects Relevant to the Students You Serve. In this chapter, we explore and adapt a methodology for expanding project ideas using our curricular resources to design and fine-tune a personalized PBL unit to our class context.

**Chapter 5, Element 5:** Use Frequent Feedback Cycles to Guide Student Work. In this chapter, we cover assessment in PBL and learn to adapt a set of handy protocols for giving students feedback as they complete their products or performance tasks in drafts. This chapter also offers guidance on keeping project work at the appropriate rigor levels and grading individual student work during PBL units.

Part 2 provides K–12 teachers with dedicated chapters on adaptable projects uplifting the CASEL 5 competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making. Each chapter provides an overview of SEL competencies in alignment with PBL and strategies for adopting practices that integrate the CASEL 5 into PBL units. The chapters in Part 2 are as follows.

**Chapter 6:** Understanding Self-Awareness for Connecting Passion and Purpose. This chapter delves into the self-awareness and self-management SEL competencies and provides an adaptable PBL unit educators can personalize for their classroom along with recommendations for equitable implementation.

**Chapter 7:** Understanding Social Awareness for Having Successful Relationships. This chapter delves into the social awareness and relationship management SEL competencies and provides an adaptable PBL unit educators can personalize for their classroom along with recommendations for equitable implementation.

**Chapter 8:** Responsible Decision Making: From Awareness to Action. This chapter delves into the responsible decision-making SEL competency

and provides an adaptable PBL unit educators can personalize for their classroom along with recommendations for equitable implementation.

Part 3 focuses on enhancing a PBL teaching plan with tools and resources that help learners work together with shared agreements and guidelines for fruitful collaboration. Strategies for maintaining your grade-level rigor levels and grading students in PBL are also addressed to help teachers effectively ensure learning and assess student work.

**Chapter 9: Using a 5-Step Roadmap to Activate Student Engagement and Rigorous PBL** This chapter helps teachers consider daily engagement in their teaching, prepare compelling and engaging entry events at the start of a PBL unit, and understand the steps needed for engagement throughout the entire project process. Downloadable and adaptable tools are also provided.

**Chapter 10: Fostering Collaboration and Teamwork.** This chapter helps teachers prepare students to collaborate and work on projects effectively through shared agreements and collaborative tools. Downloadable and adaptable tools are also provided.

**Chapter 11: Helping Students Prepare for the Public Product.** This chapter provides excellent guidelines and recommendations for preparing students to present their ideas, new learning, and calls to action in public presentations.

Finally, note that in each chapter, you will find *Important Note* feature boxes that highlight unique elements of a concept or strategy. I aim to supplement and clarify reader understanding throughout the book. Additionally, this book provides access to additional resources in the appendices, page 135. You can also visit the companion website where you can find downloadable versions of multiple templates shown throughout. Finally, we conclude our book with cited references and resources.

