

PEDALS Tip Sheet: Observing SEL in Action in Specialized Classrooms

(Focus: Connection , Reciprocity , Inclusion , Opportunities to Grow )

What to Notice During Observations

Connection: Building Trust, Safety, and Emotional Support

Between Educators and Children:

- Respectful attunement to children's communication styles — verbal, gestural, AAC, behavioral
- Responding warmly and predictably, even when a child struggles with regulation or social engagement
- Creating individualized rituals of connection (favorite greetings, songs, sensory check-ins)
- Honoring all ways children seek closeness — eye contact not required

Between Adults:

- Staff offering emotional support to each other through patience, humor, teamwork
- Clear communication during challenging transitions or behaviors

With Families:

- Open, nonjudgmental conversations with families about successes and challenges
 - Respecting family insights about their child's communication, regulation, and sensory needs
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Reciprocity: Honoring Every Form of Two-Way Interaction

Between Educators and Children:

- Following the child's lead, even when it looks different (repeating sounds, movements, nonverbal cues)
- Pausing to allow processing time before expecting responses
- Expanding interactions based on a child's individual communication mode

Between Adults:

- Modeling flexible collaboration — adapting roles fluidly during instruction and care
- Reflecting together on what's working in each child's communication growth

With Families:

- Inviting families to share strategies they use at home
 - Validating families' experiences with collaborative, two-way planning
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Inclusion: Creating Belonging for Every Learner

Between Educators and Children:

- Adapting activities, sensory environments, and routines to ensure full access for every child
- Celebrating each child's contributions, regardless of how they participate
- Offering multiple paths to success, not a single right way to engage

Between Adults:

- Including paraprofessionals, aides, therapists, and specialists fully as respected team members

With Families:

- Including families' cultural, linguistic, and neurodivergent perspectives in planning and celebration
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Opportunities to Grow: Stretching SEL Skills with Sensitivity

Between Educators and Children:

- Supporting regulation and problem-solving at the child's developmental level, not chronological age
- Creating small, individualized challenges ("You zipped your coat with a little help!")
- Reinforcing self-advocacy, autonomy, and emotional expression in diverse ways

Between Adults:

- Celebrating staff persistence and creativity in supporting individualized SEL
- Reflecting on ways to stretch relationships first, before academics or compliance

With Families:

- Partnering with families on social-emotional goals, not just academic benchmarks
 - Sharing small victories that highlight emotional growth over time
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Reflection Prompts for Leaders

🌀 Where did I see Connection , Reciprocity , Inclusion , and Growth  happening naturally today?

🌀 How were children's unique communication styles honored and expanded upon?

🌀 Did adults model patience, flexibility, and emotional availability even during challenges?

🌀 How did the environment and routines reflect true inclusion — not just physical access but emotional belonging?

Important Reminders for Specialized Classrooms

- Behavior is communication. Connection often precedes verbalization or compliance.
- Processing time matters. Silence, waiting, and flexibility are powerful relational tools.
- Regulation is relational. Children often need a regulated adult *before* they can access learning.
- All modes of communication are valid. Smiles, gestures, sounds, movements — they all count as participation.
- Adult relationships shape climate. Teams that support each other create safe spaces for vulnerable learners.

"In specialized classrooms, every moment of patience, every honoring of communication, every small connection plants seeds for lifelong growth."