

ASK THE EXPERTS

Welcome to **Ask the Experts**, the ultimate column dedicated to professional development in the field of education. In this dynamic and ever-evolving field, continuous growth and learning are paramount. In each issue, we explore the most commonly asked topic by interviewing invited experts for their insights, experiences, and strategies.

EduVerse: Welcome to **Ask the Experts**, our exclusive interview series spotlighting innovative voices shaping the future of teaching and learning. In this special issue – **Growing Tomorrow: Teaching for a Sustainable Future** – we are delighted to feature **Grazzia Maria Mendoza Chirinos** and **Dr. Luis Javier Pentón Herrera**, co-authors of *Social-Emotional Learning for English Language Educators*.

With decades of combined experience as teachers, researchers, and advocates, Grazzia and Luis explore how social-emotional learning (SEL) can become a cornerstone for sustainable education – one that nurtures empathy, resilience, and human connection alongside academic excellence.

Their book offers a vision of teaching that is deeply relational, inclusive, and transformative – an invitation for educators to teach not just the mind, but the whole individual. In this conversation, they share their reflections on the human side of sustainability, the emotional lives of teachers, and the power of SEL to help learners and educators alike flourish in an ever-changing world.

HEARTS OVER SCORES

SEL'S SECRET TO SUSTAINABLE CLASSROOMS

EXCLUSIVE

With DR. LUIS JAVIER PENTÓN HERRERA & GRAZZIA MARIA MENDOZA CHIRINOS

Luis Javier Pentón Herrera, PhD, D.Litt. (Habil.) is an award-winning Spanish and English educator and a best-selling author. In 2024, he was selected as the TESOL Teacher of the Year, awarded by the TESOL International Association and National Geographic Learning. He is a professor at VIZJA University in Poland, and his teaching and research projects are situated at the intersection of identity, emotions, and well-being in language and literacy education, social-emotional learning, autoethnography and storytelling, refugee education, and language and power.



Grazzia Maria Mendoza Chirinos, MEd, MA, is an award-winning educator with 32 years of experience in education. She was awarded the Virginia French Allen Award for Scholarship and Service in 2018 and the Outstanding Advocate Award in 2023. As a researcher at the University of Wisconsin Center for Education Research she developed the learning agenda for research to support educators and prioritized themes such as didactics, technology, and SEL. In addition, in her advocacy efforts, she contributes to highlighting women's empowerment narratives and decentering advocacy through global efforts.

PART 1 RETHINKING EDUCATION THROUGH A HUMAN LENS

Grazzia and Luis, welcome! It's such a pleasure to have you both here. To kick things off, your book opens with this powerful idea that educators teach the whole child, not just the curriculum. In a time when education so often gets laser-focused on test scores and performance metrics, why is this human-centered approach so absolutely essential?



Oh, thank you – it's wonderful to be here! Human centered education is just crucial because we really need to look at learning beyond those metrics, like standardized testing. I mean, those approaches can so easily miss out on creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and perseverance – traits that, honestly, matter the most for child and youth development, especially as skills for the future. When we teach the whole child, we're honoring their diverse backgrounds, languages, and experiences, and these are elements we weave throughout the book. By doing that, we're fostering these inclusive classrooms where everyone truly feels like they belong. And that's key – we want lifelong learners, right? For that to happen, our students need to thrive in safe spaces for learning, where they're supported and fully engaged.

Wow, Grazzia, that's spot on – honoring those diverse experiences to build belonging. Luis, what are your thoughts on this?



Absolutely. A human-centered approach reminds us that education is not just about what students know or need to learn but about who they are becoming. In my view, when we reduce the learning process to statistics or outcomes, we risk overlooking the social and emotional dimensions that make the process of learning a meaningful and lifelong activity. Teaching the whole child means recognizing that students bring their identities, languages, cultures, and emotions – that is, everything they are and everything they have at that time – into every classroom interaction. Especially today, when students are constantly exposed to violence, volatility, and instability, they need educators who see them as individuals with stories, not just learners – or should we say 'machines'? – with targets. Throughout our book, we highlight that a human-centered education cultivates all the qualities that sustain motivation far beyond test results and that contribute to building the empathetic, harmonious, and kind societies we so desperately need.

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That's such a compelling reminder, Luis, seeing students as whole people with stories. You know, many global sustainability talks zero in on the planet, but your work beautifully reminds us that sustainability also means sustaining people – emotionally and relationally. So, how does SEL fit into that bigger picture of creating sustainable schools and communities?



Thank you for this question, great observation! Yes, throughout our book, we position SEL as the heart of sustainability because it sustains people. We can't have sustainable systems without emotionally healthy and connected individuals within them which, by the way, includes teachers as much as it includes students. SEL nurtures the skills needed to engage with people from all walks of life with respect and compassion, both of which are essential to sustainable communities. In schools, helping students acquire skills that will contribute to their sustainability as human beings and future professionals means helping them learn to care for themselves and others, manage emotions constructively, and communicate across differences. When students learn these skills, they become more resilient and better equipped to engage in the ever-increasingly complex social and environmental challenges our world faces. Certainly, for us, sustainability is not just about preserving resources; it's about sustaining the human being behind the teacher and the student, and sustaining hope. SEL gives us the human foundation for a truly sustainable future.

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Luis J  vier Pent  n Herrera



Definitely sustaining people is one of our key messages! Deeper learning and long-term success are built in the foundation of a human infrastructure that brings everything together – schools and communities. From my time at USAID collaborating on developing SEL, part of the key approach was bringing in families and communities to collaborate and thrive together. Because SEL is not an add-on, it should be seamlessly threaded into the whole school and community systems. That means creating community partnerships, building civic engagement and fostering relational resilience to help communities weather all challenges, while supporting academics, emotional climate, and mental and emotional well-being. SEL is not a standalone strategy, it is a way of thinking that lets us care about ourselves and others!

I love that image of SEL as "seamlessly threaded" throughout, Grazzia—it's so integrated. Now, let bring ourselves to language classrooms, where emotional safety plays a major role in learning. So, what does it really mean to build a classroom where students feel safe enough to take risks and express themselves freely?

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Most teachers reading my response will probably nod nod along, because we feel this in our practice every day. Building emotional safety in a language classroom starts with trust. When students feel that their mistakes will be met with patience instead of judgment, scolding, punishment, or yelling, they take more linguistic and emotional risks. In my language classes, I try to create spaces where vulnerability is seen as part of learning, and where humor, laughter, cultural exchange, and curiosity are welcome. Emotional safety also means representation; that is, seeing the identities, languages, and lived experiences of the cultures I teach about (in my case, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking cultures) as well as that of my students are seen as assets, not obstacles. At the end of the day, building an emotionally safe classroom is not about removing challenge – we need challenge to build resilience and grow – but about building the confidence to face it.

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Such practical wisdom there, Luis—turning vulnerability into a strength. And Grazzia, let's hear from you on how this all connects to bridging academic learning with global citizenship. In what ways can SEL help learners not only master English but also develop empathy, intercultural understanding, and that sense of shared humanity?



Another great question! Considering global citizenship to build empathy, SEL really fosters that self- and social awareness that's key to healthy relationships, where we learn to see beyond our own perspectives and respect other viewpoints. This speaks to intercultural communication and collaboration using language as the connection to build those relationships and also be able to share values. Educators who create spaces for critical awareness – letting learners reflect on global issues like inequities, climate change, or migration – help them recognize the world's complexities and think about them through the lens of their own values and ethical reasoning. It's about gaining a more global perspective and a broader understanding of the world through others' experiences. And once learners and educators master these competencies together? Then we'll see this transformation in education that truly serves building peace and justice for all.

PART 2 EMBRACING SEL AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY

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You both describe SEL as this cross-cutting pedagogy, not just an add-on. So, what does it look like when SEL becomes part of the teacher's mindset, rather than just another strategy?



Oh, going back to my time at USAID, where we implemented a holistic SEL strategy, this approach unfolds in these different steps – starting in the classroom, expanding to the whole school, and then rippling out to the community. It's a model where the first step is building trust and a safe space for thriving, both personally and academically. In that space, educators are trained to spot and anticipate what might be stressful, and how to navigate those moments – to scaffold confidence and celebrate the process, not just the destination. It means bringing in constant reflection, spotting opportunities for growth, and reframing mistakes as chances to learn! And yes, it means elevating and valuing students' voices, honoring every learner's identities, values, contexts, and backgrounds – it's all connected!



That progression from classroom to community sounds so organic, Grazzia. Luis, how does it shift when it's truly embedded in the teacher's mindset?

When SEL becomes part of a teacher's mindset, it stops being another strategy and becomes how we see and interact with learners; that is, it becomes our identity and pedagogy. It's reflected in the tone of our voice, the questions we ask, and the way we respond to students' behaviors, mistakes, accomplishments, and emotions. Teachers grounded in SEL design lessons that balance cognitive challenge with social connection and emotional growth. They see every moment – Yes, even discipline or a disagreement – as an opportunity for learning and growth. This mindset also invites ongoing reflection, asking questions like "How am I feeling today as an educator?" "What energy am I bringing into the learning space?" SEL as a mindset transforms teaching into a relational practice where learning and well-being are inseparable.

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And speaking of emotions, they're so deeply intertwined with identity in language learning. How can educators honor students' diverse identities and emotional experiences while still holding onto academic rigor and high expectations?



Thank you for this one – it's close to my heart. Let me start by saying clearly: identity and emotions are never separate from academic rigor or high expectations. In fact, they are the foundation of meaningful learning, and without them, no deep or lasting learning can occur. When students feel seen and respected, they engage more fully and take ownership of their growth. I encourage teachers to integrate identity work into their lessons, inviting students to connect content with their personal experiences and cultural perspectives. I also invite educators to explore new dimensions of identity with students, since language learning itself is an act of identity expansion as well as an opportunity to discover new parts of ourselves and understand our emotions in new ways. Maintaining academic rigor doesn't mean being rigid; it means setting high expectations with empathy. We can challenge students intellectually while also creating space for reflection, dialogue, and care.

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You also emphasize the collective aspect of SEL – building community and belonging. Could you share an example or a practical activity that really helps foster peer connections and emotional safety in a diverse classroom?

Sure! There are several practical examples educators can use to foster belonging and build community. They range from the basics, you know, the easy-to-plan ones, like story circles. Here, learners break into small mixed groups and share a story that's meaningful to them – maybe something from their backgrounds or families. A key tip? Use a rotating talking piece to ensure everyone gets their turn to speak. And set some simple norms upfront: listen to understand, no interruptions, and those stories stay right there in the circle – confidential and safe.



Another relevant activity is creating identity maps and these can vary in intent and outcome. For individual reflection, say, each learner draws a map of their identity using words, symbols, and images that represent who they are. Some aspects to include are languages they speak, family traditions, typical foods, places that bring them comfort, their core values, and the communities they belong to. Then, they share these maps openly.

Finally, there's community reflection, which brings everyone around a common topic to discuss, uncovering those common threads and varied perspectives. This is a way to understand the things learners have in common and where their views differ. An educator could weave these three activities together seamlessly – start with the identity maps for personal insight, move into sharing circles for connection, and wrap with reflection to tie it all up. It can even be taken further and moved into sharing with families and enrich this process even more. Through these, learners and communities start truly understanding each other, becoming aware of differences and similarities, and seeing how they complement one another. It's not just about building community and belonging; it's elevating identities too.

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Those activities sound so accessible and powerful. Now, one of the most powerful ideas in your book is that SEL begins with the teacher. But let's be real, for many educators, integrating SEL can feel like "one more thing" on an already overflowing plate. What advice would you offer to teachers who want to start small but still make a meaningful impact?



SEL can absolutely begin small, step by step, without overwhelming anyone. Start with something simple like morning greetings: have everyone state one word to describe how they are feeling or something positive they bring to class that day. Afternoon closings can also be one word activities to describe what they learned or how they felt. Exit tickets are another easy win, can be done either through a post-it or digitally, or even a shoutout.

If educators want to level up a bit, let me share from our work implementing an integrated approach of SEL and academics in public schools in Honduras. We found that creating educator buy-in began through their understanding of their own SEL competences. Professional development in this area was key to let educators understand that SEL can't, shouldn't and honestly is not an add-on. It should be part of their daily work. Our holistic program began with capacity building of educators, and once this awareness clicked, they became models for their peers and then they all started implementing what they had learned. All the while, we trained learners and families in parallel. When the whole community gets on board, awareness spreads, shifts happen, and integrating SEL becomes just part of daily teaching and living. That's what brings real sustainability to schools and communities.

Thanks Grazzia. Luis, jumping in here, what's your take on easing into this for busy teachers?



That's such an important question. I always remind the teachers I work with that integrating SEL doesn't require a dramatic overhaul of their practice — it begins with awareness. Start small by intentionally checking in with yourself and your students: How am I feeling today? What can I do to bring helpful energy into our learning space? Even a few minutes of genuine connection can completely shift the emotional climate of a classroom. SEL begins in those moments when we slow down, listen, and respond with empathy. And I want to emphasize the importance of slowing down in our teaching not only for ourselves, but also for our students. Love, empathy, and care do not coexist with fast-paced teaching; they require patience, presence, and active listening. When we create pauses for reflection and connection, we remind our students, and ourselves, that learning is not a race but a shared human experience. Those small pauses often become the most transformative moments in education.



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Grazzia Maria Mendoza Chirinos

3 PART HOPE, WELL-BEING AND TEACHING FOR TOMORROW

Both of you have worked extensively across cultures and contexts. How do you see teachers around the world embracing social-emotional learning? What trends or examples give you the most hope for the future of education?

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From my experience in Latin America and the Caribbean, the USA, and other parts of the world where I've collaborated with educators, there is a high level of acceptance and need for SEL integration. Through initiatives like those from former USAID programs, SEL has been woven into education curricula by governments, recognizing its role in holistic development – so we're seeing those big policy shifts. We can also see educators who integrate local languages and community activities to foster emotional literacy and engagement as well as academic support.



One example that warms my heart is from the Garifuna communities in Honduras—they developed "Leer con Sopa" (Read with Soup) and "Leer con Café" (Read with Coffee), where the whole community gathers on weekends to cook, read books together, and just share as a group. This not only fostered community but contributed to peace-building and resilience in times of crisis or difficulties due to natural disasters and the COVID19 pandemic aftermath. It also brings organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and other global donor organizations to invest more in SEL programs to support professional development, access to education and access to technology. The fact that this is a global conversation, often starting right in classrooms, gives me so much hope. Teachers are these incredible change agents, perfecting safe spaces for learning and growth; students find their voice and agency to impact their communities – even in tough times; and now, SEL is becoming part of that local and global wisdom.

I love those Read with Soup and Read with Coffee. Luis, what global trends are lighting a fire for you?



I'm grateful to have the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from all over the world. Across the globe, I see teachers embracing SEL in creative, context-specific ways. In Latin America, for example, teachers often integrate storytelling and community dialogue as pathways to empathy. In Asia and Europe, educators are connecting SEL with multilingualism and global citizenship. What gives me the most hope is that SEL is becoming less about imported frameworks and more about locally rooted practices, as evident in teachers' adaptation of SEL to meet their students' realities. I also see a shift from individual well-being to collective well-being, where classrooms become spaces of healing and compassion. This global movement tells me that teachers everywhere are reimagining education as a deeply human, transformative act, especially as we become an increasingly "artificial," as in the Artificial Intelligence, world.

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That adaptation to local roots—yes, that’s where the magic happens. Building on hope, teaching can be both rewarding and emotionally demanding. How can school leaders and systems better support teachers’ well-being as part of a sustainable education model?



I think the first step is creating a culture of care where we are all seen as humans. Administrators, especially, should protect educators' time to focus on what's truly important for their learners, based on the context. Educators and students should be heard and become more and more involved in decision-making. Normalizing wellness programs, counseling and emotional support are also key! Leaders should lead by listening actively, being empathic and creating ripple effects within schools, districts and communities to make education emotionally and academically sustainable. When the systems include care, protection, and voice, that’s when we can see lasting change.

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A culture of care from the top down. And to wrap this part, Social-emotional learning is ultimately about humanity – how we connect, care, and coexist. What does a truly sustainable classroom look like to you, where learning and well-being grow hand in hand?



A sustainable classroom is one where teaching, learning, and well-being nourish each other. It’s a space that honors curiosity and care in equal measure; a space where academic goals don’t come at the expense of emotional health – and this is for students and teachers alike. In a sustainable classroom, relationships are central: students learn with, from, and about one another, and teachers and students develop a relationship of trust, respect, and care. Diversity is celebrated, reflection is routine, and mistakes are seen as part of growth. The teacher models balance, showing that rest, empathy, and community are part of success. Ultimately, a sustainable classroom helps teachers be healthy and happy, and prepares students not just to succeed, but to sustain themselves and others long after they leave school.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Finally, if you could leave EduVerse readers with one message from Social-Emotional Learning for English Language Educators, what would it be – especially for those striving to teach with both intellect and heart? This question is for both of you.



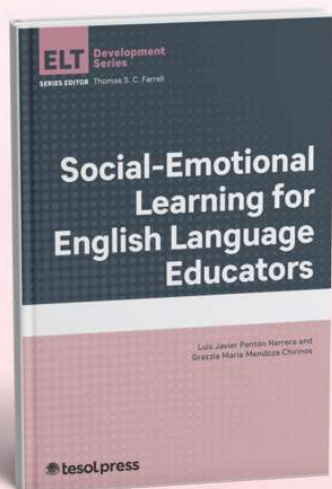
My final message? Teaching is our chance to build empathy, belonging, connection, and resilience. I've seen this so vividly in contexts of crisis and conflict, and I truly believe keeping it at the core makes real change possible. By honoring our humanity as educators and the humanity of our learners, we build relationships, global citizenship, and this holistic quality education where languages and cultures become bridges for the world to come together.



If I could leave one message, it's that teaching is an act of humanity. Every lesson, every interaction, is an opportunity to affirm a student's worth and potential. SEL is not separate from language or academics; it is the language of connection itself. For teachers striving to teach with both intellect and heart, remember that your presence, empathy, and authenticity already embody SEL. When we teach from a place of compassion, we help students learn not only *what* to think, but *how* to care, and that is what truly transforms education.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Teach the whole child:** Prioritize human-centered education over metrics to nurture creativity, empathy, and belonging, honoring diverse identities for resilient, lifelong learners in safe spaces.
- **SEL as sustainability's core:** SEL sustains emotional health and connections for teachers and students, integrating families and communities to build resilience against global challenges and foster hope.
- **Foster emotional safety:** In language classes, build trust by embracing mistakes, vulnerability, humor, and cultural assets – boosting confidence without eliminating challenges.
- **Link academics to global citizenship:** SEL enhances empathy and intercultural skills via language, encouraging reflection on issues like migration to promote ethical reasoning and shared humanity.
- **Embed SEL in mindset:** Transform teaching by infusing SEL into daily interactions, balancing rigor with connection, and using self-reflection to turn every moment into growth.
- **Balance identity and rigor:** Integrate personal stories into lessons for deeper engagement; set empathetic high expectations to expand identities through language learning.
- **Build community practically:** Use story circles, identity maps, and reflections to highlight similarities/differences—extend to families for elevated belonging and understanding.
- **Start small for impact:** Begin with quick check-ins or pauses; professional development creates buy-in, making SEL a sustainable daily practice across communities.



Teaching is an act of humanity.



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