



This PDF is linked to a blog post series from Zach Bell reflecting on the [Youth-Nex 2019 conference](#) and SEL loss from COVID-19. See the [first post](#) here, and the [second post](#) linked to this PDF.

What I learned from the 2019 Youth-Nex conference is that for moral development, dialogue, and social justice education to be effective we need the following in place. I'll refer to these as the **Four Factors** going forward.

1. **Safe environment** with bonds of community, belonging, and trust, so that youth can be vulnerable.
2. **Well-trained adult facilitators** who can responsively adapt their work to the developmental and identity intersections of their youth.
3. **Experiential pedagogy and power structures that share authority with youth** so that there is authentic co-construction of rule-based systems with meaningful stakes (e.g. hiring staff) and space for critical reflection and praxis.
4. **Accessible to most students.** In hopes of being realistic given the often under-resourced state of public schools and structural inequity that exist in our systems, I want to add one realism-check category so that we're not just finding solutions for affluent youth.

Below are avenues I see to explore options for doing social-emotional learning work, and admittedly cursory assessments of each option’s potential:

	Safe Environment	Well-Trained Adult Facilitators	Experiential Pedagogy / Youth Power	Accessible to Most Students
Outside of School Nonprofits	X	X	X	
Push-in or After-school Nonprofits		Maybe?	X	X
Holistic School Redesign	X	X	X	
Flexible Learning Spaces	X	X	X	Maybe?
Physical Education	Maybe?	X	X	X

Outside-of-School Youth Nonprofits:

- Pro: There is much more control over the Four Factors, especially the “safe environment,” such as us having a two-week overnight summer camp at Camp Common Ground, where we can explicitly orient youth to “new norms” that are different than in the schools that they may be coming from. The experience of being in nature, the independence from families, the bonding of sleeping overnight in the same cabin, and the time to have deep vulnerable bonding experiences, like our “broken heart” circle at Camp Common Ground make this an ideal environment for moral development. Furthermore, staff can be trained in curriculum-specific ways, and there is much more space and time for emergent and constructivist pedagogy, including the rare “closed system” for simulations, and time to process when there is conflict or big feelings.
- Con: Access is inherently limited by funds, space, transportation - and now, because of COVID-19.

Push-in or After-school Nonprofits:

- **Pro:** This can significantly increase access for more students, by holding afterschool clubs, guest workshops at assemblies or classes, or school-wide culture and climate consultations. At Camp Common Ground, we've begun the "Common Ground Leadership Club," to create a bridge from summer to the school year, so that our youth can meet weekly to get support in sustaining their cross-cultural friendships and implementing their "plans for disruption" to make their own schools more inclusive. By holding it at school, other students who didn't go to camp can attend or be impacted.
- **Con:** Schools often have a multitude of auxiliary organizational partners, and it can be very challenging to get buy-in and commitment from students, which totally erodes the "safe environment," and creates major curricular problems when half of the students missed the previous lesson. As a teacher, I have served as the teacher-facilitator for the [Ever Forward Club](#), a mentorship program for young black and brown boys that met after school. While there were lots of individually powerful moments, the lack of consistency and commitment ultimately made deeper work impossible at my school, and I discontinued the club after a year and a half. There are also so many out-of-our-control factors, like slashed budgets and changing principals, making this a hard option to invest in.

Holistic School Redesign for Independent (and Charter) Schools:

- **Pro:** This is a way to meet the Four Factors with much more duration than a summer program or afterschool nonprofit. When there is whole-school buy-in, meaning assessments reflect the values of moral development and dialogue (e.g. report cards track social-emotional and other non-academic skills, as opposed to just A-F on academics), school professional development and hiring practices reflect these values, curriculum and even school power structures are aligned, this presents very powerful opportunities.
- **Con:** The regulation of public education, and chronic underfunding, simply does not allow in most cases for this kind of flexibility on testing, class time duration, curriculum adaptability, and so on. We may find more schools that experiment in this direction that identify as "Progressive Schools" (see [Loving Learning](#) by Tom Little, former principal of Park Day School in Oakland), Montessori, Waldorf, and even more-so the radical student choice-centered [Sudbury Schools](#) and the rich, if controversial, Unschooling movement. Putting questions aside about the effectiveness of these schools (and effectiveness on which outcomes), it is certainly clear that as of now, these are not mainstream public options.

Classrooms in Flexible Charter or Experimental Public Schools:

- **Pro:** Like the progressive independent schools designed for beyond-academic skills, a capable and empowered educator in a flexible environment can create the Four Factors within their classroom. For example, at Urban Montessori Charter School (UMCS), a (relatively rare) public Montessori school, the self-contained classrooms in this diverse Oakland school have significant flexibility in curriculum and timing of lessons. As mixed-aged classrooms in a K-8 school, most students have built deep bonds with their

peers across grade levels and cultural lines. In Evan Fortin's middle school classroom at UMCS, students regularly share authority in complex, real-world, high-stakes group decision making processes. When COVID-19 began seriously impacting students, they held a discussion (using Robert's Rules of Order and majority vote, with smaller break out committees for agile decision-making) to determine how to best support their classroom community. They ultimately decided to take the funds they had raised from their class's t-shirt making business to provide funds (in \$200 increments) to families in need within their school, and determined that Evan should handle requests and distribution of funds. Students collectively choosing to put their teacher in a position of power for the greater good implies a level of moral development that greatly outpaces a more traditional power hierarchy - and is a rare sight amongst rebellious pre-teens!

- **Con:** There is so much variability here across educators and schools, it is simply hard to make this accessible consistently to most students without a significant change in national and state requirements for testing and other regulations. Additionally, requirements change! While COVID-19 has in some ways created an opportunity for creative options because there is so little precedent, the lack of in-person classes makes social skill building that much more daunting. There is still a lot of potential for "centers of excellence," and sharing best practices among individual educators in these special classrooms, but this also requires schools to encourage teachers to attend conferences and network and publicize their work, which can sound laughable to many teachers who feel saddled with endless responsibilities as is.

Redefining Within-School Positions: A Closer Look at Physical Education

- **Pro:** The biggest pro here is potential - if we are able to install the Four Factors in common public school settings, then it could reach a much broader swath of students, and become a part of the fabric of an entire generation. "Cursive" once was ubiquitously cultivated; could we not substitute "empathy" for "penmanship" amongst Gen Z? In many ways, the most common place these social-emotional and moral skills are cultivated in the school system are after school and recess play, with push-in nonprofits like [Playworks](#) publicizing a massive catalog of prosocial games. However, there is huge variation in the amount of training staff members receive who supervise recess (in part because these positions are not necessarily well-funded; for example, AmeriCorps stipends), and after-school is often not attended with the requisite consistency for deep work. "Advisory," sometimes called "Homeroom," is popular in the Bay Area, and often includes some social-emotional curriculum, and I think there is significant promise here. At my current school, during Advisory, we hold Restorative Justice Circles, run the "[Second Step](#)" Social-Emotional Learning curriculum, and in previous years had engaged in service-learning projects around homelessness and environmental justice, including building relationships with neighbors in a curbside community, and attending youth-led climate strike marches in San Francisco. Still - "Advisory" or "Homeroom" has many of the same problems of inconsistency across schools and over time. So what about something that is mandatory, daily, in all schools, and is taught by credentialed educators? Let's take a closer look at P.E. The California Department of Education provides requirements for the [number of minutes and school days](#) for P.E., and publishes [Content Standards](#). These are quite broad, and also explicitly name social skills. For

example, Grade 6, Standard 5 sub-categories includes “Self-Responsibility,” “Social Interaction,” and “Group Dynamics.” Perhaps we can still teach dodgeball, but students need to agree on fair teams themselves? Perhaps games are structured where one player needs to self-sacrifice for the betterment of the team? Perhaps students rotate roles as captains, peer-coaches, or even judges? Perhaps, in a final unit, students need to design their own game, naming how the rules (“Game Mechanics” in game-based pedagogy jargon) will affect incentives and outcomes, and may advantage or disadvantage certain players or create specific group dynamics (cooperative, competitive, alliance-based, etc.)? Perhaps “assessments” can be critical reflections by students on the consequences of the rules they implemented?

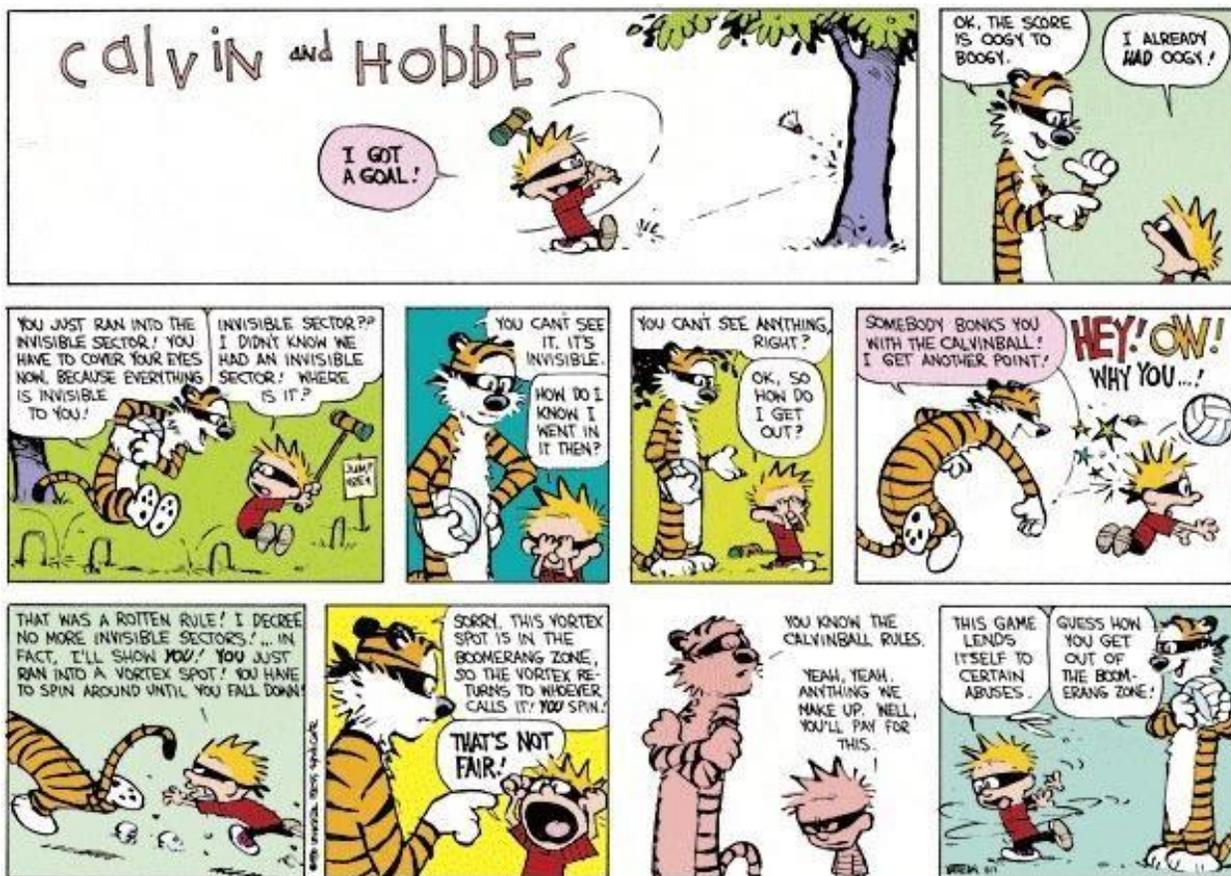
- Con: Of course, P.E. teachers don’t have unlimited freedom. Of course, dealing with delicate group dynamics in a 48 minute block may lead to big feelings and conflict that can’t get dealt with until after school. Of course, P.E. teachers aren’t currently trained for this type of teaching, and there aren’t lots of assessments that align towards it. And of course, we’re talking about teenagers who are in the middle of a school day, and it can be hard enough for them to feel safe getting sweaty in front of peers, let alone receiving feedback non-defensively or other higher-order SEL skills.

At the end of the day, a diversity of tactics is likely the approach we’ll need to take to address this overwhelming need - now more than ever - to teach our youth to be moral actors with a strong foundation of social-emotional and dialogical skills. The gaps can be daunting; when I recently searched for “gender education nonprofits” [there was not a single hit on the first page of Google that mentioned boys or men](#), so we have a long way to go on providing truly holistic identity development for all of our kids.

But as many of us take a step back during the coronavirus pandemic to evaluate our current systems, it may be time to think imaginatively and critically at concrete ways that we can support *all* students in becoming moral actors, in whatever context they are in.

Let’s look at our educational practices with that lens. Rather than just asking “can they score a point?”, let’s ask, “are they grappling with what’s a fair rule?” and “are they deciding how to score the points, and if they even want to?” And may we approach these challenging tasks with playfulness and a love of learning.

May we approach these challenging tasks with playfulness. I encourage you to read the comic below and see what comes up for you. How would you feel about your child playing Calvin Ball at school (perhaps with a bit more adult facilitation)?



Source: Calvin and Hobbes book by Bill Watterson. Inspired by "[Calvin & Hobbes Explain Why the Note Ban Is a Lot Like Calvinball](#)" written by Vritti Issar.

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