

Leading Learning Paths

Pathways to Student Well-being

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Students at SEK Alborán learn from regular experiences with nearby greenhouses in their neighborhood.

How can we effectively support learning and well-being among our students? Perhaps we can draw inspiration from the innovative educators at the SEK International Schools network of Spain. Guided by the writings of Felipe Segovia, learning and well-being are fundamental pillars of SEK's educational vision. In this vision, learners develop essential competencies through authentic and self-directed engagement within their community contexts. These competencies encompass intercultural empathy, responsible collaboration, and a sense of purpose.

Student well-being goes beyond physical health; it encompasses mental health as well. To foster mental well-being, we must empower students by developing their agency, fostering a sense of belonging, nurturing their curiosity, and instilling feelings of satisfaction and joy. As educators, our role is to design meaningful experiences that enable learners to develop these qualities within and with their communities.

One pedagogical approach that has gained traction within SEK schools is called *learning paths*. These are sequences of formal and informal learning experiences that facilitate the development of competencies through encounters, explorations, and connections with places and people within their local communities. While these experiences outside the classroom align with curricular goals, they are authentically situated in the community, taking place in real places with real people about real topics.

For instance, SEK International School Alborán, situated in the agricultural heart of southern Spain, offers students an opportunity to explore the numerous nearby greenhouses. These greenhouses serve as living laboratories, where students can learn about ecological sustainability and farming techniques. They engage in conversations with the workers, gaining insights into their daily routines and the challenges they face. Additionally, students have the chance to observe the plants and insects used in sustainable crop cultivation, fostering a

deeper understanding of the agricultural process. The image at the top showcases students savoring and comparing the diverse range of tomatoes grown in their community.

Students at SEK Santa Isabel take advantage of their neighborhood's rich history, where prominent Spanish authors like Lope de Vega and Cervantes once resided during the Golden Ages. This historical context provides a platform for learning about various topics, including civics and government. Instead of merely reading about the components and roles of government, students actively participate in community-based learning experiences. They regularly visit civic institutions, engage in conversations with locals, and ask questions, enriching their understanding of these concepts. The image at the right illustrates students presenting a concise overview of a specific branch of government, captivating passersby who are eager to learn more.

Another enriching learning opportunity for students at SEK Atlántico are the nearby beaches, where they regularly visit throughout the year. The changing surroundings provide a unique backdrop for exploration. One day, a group of young students encountered local women engaged in shellfish harvesting, who graciously shared their knowledge of the tools and techniques used in this traditional practice. These diverse contexts demonstrate students' consistent pursuit of learning, whether in urban or rural settings, through a combination of formal and informal community-based experiences.



In Madrid, students at SEK Santa Isabel learn about civics by visiting government buildings and offer public presentations about their work.



Students at SEK Atlántico learn from shellfish harvesters in their community.

Tips for Planning Learning Paths

The foundation of a successful learning path lies in identifying and leveraging your community's cultural resources. Whether your community is urban or rural, it is rich in people, places, and traditions that shape its culture. Designing a learning path involves considering what already exists in your community that is intriguing, distinct, historically significant, or holds value for its

inhabitants. Here are some helpful tips to guide you in the planning process:

- **Conduct a curriculum review:** Scan the topics and goals you intend to explore this year. Identify those that align with local people, places, or issues in your community. Choose a few that resonate particularly with your context. Effective learning paths are integrated into a Unit of Inquiry, allowing learners to experience transdisciplinary themes, lines of inquiry, and your (and their) questions.
- **Create a local map:** Explore your community and jot down interesting and valuable local places on a map. Use the internet or a physical map to generate potential locations that could be part of a learning path.
- **Compile a wisdom inventory:** Every community boasts individuals and groups with unique expertise, diverse experiences, and profound wisdom. Identify these people in your community. Who possess knowledge that is intriguing and valuable for your learners? Reach out to them and gauge their interest in sharing and collaborating with your students.
- **Engage families:** Families are often an valuable resource for ideas about captivating places and individuals. Inform them about your plans and seek their input.
- **“Tune in” to local issues:** Connecting students to real-world problems in the community is a primary objective of learning paths. Identify current political, social, economic, or environmental challenges facing your local community. Select a few that align with your goals and

the interests of your learners. Consider the stakeholders involved in these issues and explore ways your learners can connect with them.

- **Visit and explore:** Take your own learning path and visit places to gain a sense of its nature and how learners will experience it. Take a stroll through your school’s neighborhood to notice interesting places, objects, and routes.

Creating a meaningful learning path for you and your students is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. However, the provided tips should spark ideas for building a sequence of experiences that foster their learning and well-being. While ensuring these learning paths align with your curricular goals is crucial, here are some additional considerations to keep in mind during planning:

- **Learning paths are not mere field trips or one-off excursions.** They are iterative and repeated experiences woven into your goals, curriculum, and local community. Encourage students to revisit these places, develop relationships with them and their surroundings, and make connections.
- **Learning paths are more than just relocating a planned lesson.** They leverage the community, such as a market, park, or art gallery, as a pedagogical resource.
- **The path itself is as important as the destination.** Consider students’ experiences as they travel, including the route and interesting features along the way. The path connects students to their surroundings, allowing for time and

opportunities to explore surprises and curiosities.

- **Start small.** Experiment with modest paths first, perhaps ones that are simple to plan and brief. Learn from these small steps and build upon your successes.
- **Recruit helpers.** Supporting your class to walk and visit places can be logistically challenging for a single teacher. Find older students, parents, or others who can assist you in guiding and documenting the learning process.
- **Provide reflective questions to support students' focus and learning.** Ask questions before, during, or after the path to encourage them to think about their experiences and insights.
- **Gather feedback from students.** They may be surprised or confused by learning outside the classroom. Be open to gathering their feedback on the learning path, including what they learned and what helped or hindered their learning. Remember, you are also learning as a teacher!
- **Document, reflect, and share your observations.** Gather and reflect on the evidence of what and how your students learned. Share this information with your colleagues. Invite them to help you think through your learning and develop your next steps.
- **Embrace emergence.** Learning paths evolve, emerge, and change over time. Be open to this. They can be adapted and modified based on emerging situations, rather than being a fixed lesson repeated every year.