

Enhancing Learning Through Social and Emotional Education

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The role of emotions in learning has captured the attention of educators throughout the country. Best selling books such as Emotional Intelligence (Bantam Books, 1995) by Daniel Goleman and The Multiple Intelligences (Basic Books, 1993) by Howard Gardner have been instrumental in stimulating this interest. And, the increasing emphasis in the workplace on cooperation, teamwork, and self-motivation has put additional pressure on schools to prepare students who are competent in what we call "social and emotional learning" (SEL).

Key SEL skills include self-awareness (e.g., recognizing one's emotions), self-regulation of emotion (e.g., coping with anger, recognizing strengths and mobilizing positive feelings about self), self-monitoring (e.g., focusing on task at hand, working toward optimal performance), empathy and perspective-taking (e.g., being a good listener, understanding others' perspectives), and social skills in handling relationships (e.g., exercising leadership, responding constructively to interpersonal obstacles).

Social and emotional skills such as these can play a big role in the development of thinking and learning, activities that have often been considered to be solely cognitive. We've learned, for example, that many processes once thought of as pure "thinking" in the past, actually involve cognitive and emotional aspects working synergistically. Brain studies have shown that memory is coded to specific social and emotional situations.

Consider the following situations in which there is real or imagined threat, heightened anxiety associated with some event, or strong feelings of anger or sadness. Remember your first year of teaching and the first time your principal came to observe your performance? Can you recall wondering whether a certain student would be disruptive that day, or if the class would participate in the activities you planned? Or, have you ever had an argument with your spouse at home and then "lost it" over a mild incident with one of your students?

Think about how effective you were at those times, or whether you could even figure out the problem. It's not uncommon to find a reduction in our task focus and less flexibility in our problem solving. Students bring similar experiences to class. Imagine sitting in class just having learned that your girlfriend is breaking up with you and the teacher keeps asking

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about your homework and why it isn't complete. It might be tough to keep control.

Goleman describes such situations as ones in which the thinking brain in the frontal cortex is "hijacked" or taken over by the automatic responses of the older limbic brain. In other words, the rational mind is swamped by the emotional. Carrying out thoughtful, efficient problem solving and decision making under stress requires a high level of social and emotional skill.

Likewise, have you had students with great intellectual potential who aren't successful socially because of difficulties dealing with feelings or carrying out desired behaviors? Much of this is due to a lack of integration of cognitive and affective skills. We don't automatically acquire needed skills or integrative capacities and the ability to put them to work in the "real time" of everyday interactions.

How does this information fit into school? In our book, Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators (ASCD, 1997), we asked, "Is it possible to attain academic and personal success without addressing SEL skills?" After carefully reviewing the scientific literature, making site visits and talking with practitioners throughout the country, and examining our own extensive experiences in developing and evaluating school-based prevention programs, the accumulating evidence suggests that the answer is no.

Clearly, in addition to sound academic programs and competent teachers, effective schools are distinguished by having a systematic process for promoting children's SEL. Indeed, As Robert Sylwester stated in his highly acclaimed book, A Celebration of Neurons (ASCD, 1995), "...emotion is very important in the process. It's impossible to separate emotion from the other important activities in life. Don't try" (pp. 72, 75).

The missing piece in many school programs is recognition of children's feelings -- feelings that may so confuse students that they don't follow directions, continually go off-task, can't pay attention, or have difficulty working cooperatively. Conversely, feelings may enhance learning, as when they're regulated to help students be flexible thinkers, quick problem solvers, and team players.

Ours is a social world. The abilities to pay attention, listen accurately, remember what we hear and learn, and engage in thoughtful decision making, are among the most important skills for navigating our world successfully. Further, effective social problem solving includes skills in understanding signs of one's own and others' feelings, and being able to accurately label and express feelings. All of these are related to social and emotional learning.

SEL serves to exemplify our increasing understanding of the integrated and synergistic way in which our cognitions, emotions, behaviors, and histories come together to influence learning and performance. Competence in social and emotional functioning is a product of coordinating skills in the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral areas.

A Healthy Connection Among Thoughts, Emotions, and Behavior

The following sample guidelines illustrate how teachers can promote SEL.

√ **Instruction.** SEL programs engage students as active partners in creating a classroom atmosphere where caring, responsibility, trust, and commitment to learning can thrive. Students' commitment to and involvement in classroom decision making serves as a motivating force and gives them a chance to actually employ SEL skills to influence

their environment. Research indicates that these activities can strengthen their attachment to school, interest in learning, and positive behaviors.

SEL instruction uses a variety of teaching methods to actively promote multiple domains of intelligence. Gardner's work has made it clear that the various domains of intelligence are interrelated. Thoughts and feelings can profoundly affect academic motivation and interest. Using activities that call on a variety of intelligences, such as cooperative learning, artistic expression, group discussions, and self-reflection allow for the strengths and weaknesses of a range of children.

Repetition and practice are vital to the integration of cognition, emotion, and behavior. Few would argue against the need for repeated rehearsal of academic skills. With SEL there is an added challenge. In addition to learning

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new skills, it may also involve the unlearning of habitual patterns of thought and behavior, a situation different than that found in the solely academic realm.

Educators can enhance the transfer of SEL from lesson-based or other formal instruction to everyday life by using prompting and cuing techniques throughout all aspects of school life. Social and emotional skills must be strengthened through practice in many contexts throughout the day. When appropriate situations arise, prompts and cues can elicit the SEL skills. Teaching by example (modeling) is also a powerful instructional technique.

√ ***Curriculum. The integration of SEL with traditional academics greatly enhances learning in both areas.*** According to brain researchers, learning takes place in both an emotional and a behavioral context. Students are more likely to use SEL skills when they can attach academic skills to everyday feelings and actions. SEL skills can readily be connected to other thinking skills such as analytical thinking, prediction, synthesis, analogy, and metaphor.

SEL programs emphasize the promotion of prosocial attitudes and values about self, others, and work. Children need confidence that they can learn, accomplish, and interact successfully. They also need to acquire skills and have opportunities to practice, so their confidence has a realistic basis. Self-esteem is generated when they engage in valued behaviors and are recognized for doing so.

Academic and SEL goals are unified by a comprehensive, theory-based framework that is developmentally appropriate. Having a consistent conceptual thread woven throughout the entire school curriculum is a hallmark of the most effective SEL instruction. A unifying framework is less confusing than a series of fragmented activities focusing on isolated issues.

√ ***School Climate. A caring, supportive, and challenging classroom and school climate is most conducive to effective SEL teaching and learning.*** Research indicates that the way students experience and perceive their classroom and school climate relates to their psychosocial and academic development. Other studies have shown that the school environment is a significant factor in promoting high standards of behavior and achievement, including the ability to think critically and make informed judgments.

SEL programs and activities that are coordinated with the regular curriculum and life of the classroom and school are most likely to have the desired effect on students, and are also most likely to endure. It isn't sufficient for SEL programs to be taught as add-ons. The skills taught are an essential part of the overall academic program's success.

Finally, all of these efforts, as well as those of the entire educational program, are enhanced when there is administrative, family, and community involvement in and support for SEL programs. Although instruction in social and emotional skills is not a panacea for solving all the problems we face, it offers tremendous opportunities for fostering knowledgeable, responsible, and caring students.

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