

# inspiring

## THE BEST IN STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

*Inspiring the Best in Students* was born out of my 23 years working with children and adolescents, first as an English teacher, drama director, and coach; next as a staff development specialist; and finally as an education consultant, often invited to work with schools' most challenging students. I entered the classroom in 1986, well prepared to teach English, but not nearly as well prepared to teach kids. My preparation focused more on teaching content than on understanding how to connect with, motivate, and manage adolescents. Most of my education courses were theoretical survey classes, with little exposure to real children until student teaching, which was during my last semester. Needless to say, there was a lot of "on-the-job training."

During my first few years of teaching, I gradually started to understand the fascinating challenges that adolescents present: their drive to challenge, critique, and eventually separate from the adults in their life; their constant testing of the limits imposed on them; their lack of impulse control; and the ongoing drama involving relationships with their peers. Then one summer, I took an intensive course in what is now known as choice theory (Glasser, 1998). For me, as for many of the teachers I've worked with over the years, choice theory articulates a philosophy of teaching that resonated, one based on positive relationships and inspiration instead of power and control.

I first applied choice theory to my classroom by using the ideas to create a needs-satisfying learning environment, characterized by positive relationships, student voice and choice, and differentiated, engaging teaching and learning strategies. I explain this process in detail in my first book, *The Classroom of*

*Choice: Giving Students What They Need and Getting What You Want* (Erwin, 2004). As I continued my work toward certification in choice theory, I decided to try an approach to literature that involved students in analyzing literary characters' actions, thoughts, and motivation through a choice theory lens.

To do this, I needed to teach my students some choice theory. When I did, I felt like I'd struck gold. My students learned the concepts easily and eagerly, and they applied them in ways that yielded a deeper understanding of literary characters, conflicts, and themes. Serendipitously, students gained insight not only into literary characters but into themselves and others. Choice theory provided us with a common language and understanding for meaningful class discussions and problem solving, as well as a plethora of writing, speaking, and listening activities and assignments. It also improved relationships between myself and my students, as well as among my students. Although I didn't know it at the time, this was my first experience with a kind of character education called social-emotional learning (SEL). I was hooked.

I continued to teach choice theory, augmenting it with other, related SEL and character strategies. Behavior problems all but disappeared, students enjoyed each other and liked coming to class, and students' report card grades and standardized test scores (in New York state, it was the Regents ELA exam) continued to improve. By this time I was teaching 11th and 12th grade students. When graduates returned after their first semester or year in college, or when on leave from the military, they mentioned SEL as benefiting them at least as often as the writing skills they had acquired.

In fact, one August afternoon, I received a call from one of my seniors who'd graduated a little over a year before. His name was Mike. He was a bright, funny kid, the kind who make you glad they are never absent. He was a sensitive student from a tough home environment, and I worried about him. During his last semester of high school, he was using marijuana (probably other drugs as well) and was in a destructive relationship with a troubled girl. On the eve of graduation, he had no plans other than to try to find a job out of state and live with his girlfriend. When he called that day, the conversation was short, but he let me know that he had moved to Florida to live with his mother and stepdad, had broken up with his girlfriend, had completed an intensive outpatient drug rehabilitation program, and was planning to enroll in a community college. "I

just wanted to say thanks. My life's a lot better now," he concluded, "and it's because of that choice stuff you used to teach us."

"I'm glad that helped you, Mike, but if you think it was the 'choice stuff' that did it, then I'm going to have to lower your grade," I kidded.

He thought for a second. "Yeah, yeah. I know, I know—it was me."

I wished him luck, said good-bye, hung up, and basked in one of those validating moments that come along every once in a while in education. As I thought about Mike and the difficult life choices he'd made recently, I knew that he would have gotten an *A* in my English class with or without the SEL. But without it, that phone call would never have come, and Mike's life may have been terribly different. In Chapter 1, you will find that there is a solid research-based rationale for character education and SEL, and although educational practice must be informed by good scholarly research, it is stories like Mike's and others I'll share throughout the book that prove to me the importance of integrating social-emotional learning and character development into the curriculum.

## The Intended Audience

This book is intended for anyone who works with young people and wants to help them develop the intra- and interpersonal skills required to be a successful, contributing member of society. It was originally intended for teachers of grades 3–12. Most of the student-centered activities are designed with those ages in mind, but many could be simplified for younger children or made more complex for young adults. Using the concepts explained in this book, primary school teachers also should find it easy to create activities and teaching strategies of their own. Additionally, this book could be a useful resource for school counselors, social workers, coaches, members of the clergy, community youth organizations, parents, and any others who want to promote positive youth development.

## How to Use This Book

This book can be used in as many ways as there are schools or classrooms. Here are a few general ideas.

Ideally, schools would use this book as a foundational resource for broadening the scope of their mission, to include educating the whole child through the integration of social-emotional learning into the curriculum, thus promoting strong character. To do this, teachers might follow the book chapter by chapter as each new concept builds on the last, choosing activities that are developmentally appropriate. Integrating this book's content with the general curriculum, schools would probably need two full years to teach the entire book.

Another approach might be to divide the book's curriculum by grade level: grade 3, learning the knowledge and skills in Chapters 1 and 2; grade 4, Chapters 3 and 4; and so forth. In elementary schools, the *Inspiring the Best* curriculum might be taught in special blocks of time to two or three classes at once by a school counselor, teacher, or team of teachers who have a special interest in character development. Or it might be more invisibly integrated into daily lessons by the general education teacher.

In secondary schools, this curriculum might fall into the domain of the school counselor or the English, social studies, or health teachers, as much of the content can be very easily integrated into those curricula. Many schools have instituted an advisory period for students to develop a mentoring relationship with a teacher (some use homeroom this way). I know from visiting hundreds of schools that those advisories can be either highly effective or a waste of everyone's time, depending on how they are structured. *Inspiring the Best in Students* provides a ready-made curriculum and dozens of student-friendly activities that would build student-teacher relationships while teaching useful information and skills.

Another way of using this book is as a kind of grab bag of information and activities that target specific student needs. For example, you might address impulse control or teach students the social skill of active listening. Some of the activities—the Inside-Outside Circle or the class meeting, for example—might be adapted to teach not only character and social-emotional learning, but also the academic curriculum. Although using the activities out of context may not be as effective as if they were part of a coherent character development program, they would still encourage students' social and emotional development. Any way you choose to use this book, I thank you for doing whatever you can to inspire the best in kids.



# 1 | INSPIRING THE BEST

If you are reading this book, you almost certainly work with young people. Maybe you are a teacher, counselor, or school administrator. Or maybe you are a social worker, therapist, mentor, coach, or youth development leader. In whatever capacity you work with children or teenagers, you want to inspire what is best in them. If you are reading this book, you also probably have experienced a respectable amount of personal success in your life. Before considering what is involved in bringing out the best in students, I ask you to reflect on the personal traits or qualities that have enabled you to experience success.

These personal traits are likely to include, among others, responsibility, respect, perseverance, honesty, integrity, patience, a strong work ethic, self-discipline, optimism, empathy, compassion, and cooperation. We need these characteristics to survive and thrive in a complex, competitive world. Of course, it is virtually impossible to demonstrate all of these qualities consistently; however, without exhibiting them at important life junctures, you would not have experienced the degree of success that you have. And without the positive relationships and achievements that your character traits have made possible, you probably would not experience the degree of happiness you enjoy in life.

Today's students face an even more challenging world than we did. Therefore, it is more important than ever for young people to develop the qualities that enabled our success, character traits that will help them learn and achieve well in school, perform satisfactorily in the workplace, communicate effectively, and develop and maintain positive, trusting relationships in their lives.

This book, then, is about promoting character development. This first chapter will address fundamental questions about the prospect of integrating a character education initiative into what many perceive as an already overwhelming curriculum. Subsequent chapters will focus on specific information and skills that support students' character development and will provide engaging, research-based teaching strategies.

### **The Need for Character Education or Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Disturbing statistics suggest that what we are currently doing in schools to help students meet the challenges of contemporary society leaves many children and adolescents behind. In fact, 20 to 60 percent of urban, suburban, and rural high school students become chronically disengaged from school—not counting those who already dropped out (Klem & Connell, 2004). In America's 10 largest cities, the high school graduation rates hover around 50 percent. In New York City, Baltimore, and Detroit, graduation rates in 2006 were a dismal 38.9 percent, 38.5 percent, and 21.7 percent, respectively (Toppo, 2006). Furthermore, approximately 30 percent of high school students “participate in or experience multiple high-risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, sex, violence, depression, attempted suicide) that interfere with school performance and jeopardize their potential for life success” (Payton et al., 2008, p. 3).

Unfortunately, for at least the last decade, the emphasis—or, some might argue, the obsession—in U.S. education has been on raising academic standards and student (and teacher) accountability through frequent standardized testing. I'm not arguing that we should lower academic standards, nor should we decrease accountability. However, as a society, we need to address the questions, What is the purpose of public education? Is it enough to focus on students' academic and intellectual competence alone and leave all other aspects of their development to chance? The statistics shared here shout, “No!” If we are to help all children reach their full potential; become contributing, successful members of a democratic society; and improve the unsettling trends just discussed, we must address the development and education of the whole child.

What, then, are the dimensions of a whole human being? First is the physical dimension: a person's health, strength, motor skills, and athletic ability. Next is the intellectual dimension: memory, learning, thinking skills, problem solving, and creativity. The third dimension covers emotions: emotional awareness and understanding, self-regulation, self-motivation, and self-esteem. The fourth dimension is the social dimension: forming and maintaining positive interactions with family, friends, peers, coworkers, the community, and society at large. Finally, there is the spiritual dimension: our relationship with something larger than ourselves, whether we call it God, Allah, Jehovah, a Higher Power, Nature, Humanity, or even our purpose or legacy.

The human dimension with which schools are primarily concerned is that of the intellect. In response to pressure from federal and state education departments to raise academic standards and increase accountability, schools emphasize intellectual development, particularly in math and verbal areas, almost to the exclusion of everything else. As educators, we fail our students if we don't also address two other important human dimensions: the social and emotional. By intentionally helping students develop those facets of themselves, we will simultaneously improve both their physical and intellectual development.

Today, there is an increased call to promote the education of the whole child. Stating that educating "the whole child cannot happen if emphasis is placed solely on academic achievement" (p. 11), *ASCD's Learning Compact Redefined: A Report of the Commission on the Whole Child* (2007) recommends that school districts incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) into their programs. Over the last dozen years in my role as a consultant, I have often been invited to work with students who have been expelled from their home schools or who have been involved with the judicial system. I am frequently struck by how intellectually bright and creative these students are. Their problems don't stem from the inability to succeed academically. In almost every case, it is the social and emotional knowledge and skills that have been deficient, which often leads to academic failure and chronically disruptive or antisocial behavior. If we fail to address these needs, we are indirectly sentencing many of these students to a lifetime of problems and burdening society with all the emotional, social, and fiscal issues that accompany them.



There is another important consideration. Just as a developmental window of opportunity exists for more easily acquiring a second language, the time when the frontal cortex gradually matures (the elementary, middle, and high school years) is the optimal time to encourage emotional, social, and moral development. “By leaving the emotional lessons children learn to chance,” writes Goleman (1995), “we risk largely wasting the window of opportunity presented by the slow maturation of the brain to help children cultivate a healthy [social and] emotional repertoire” (p. 286). Ideally, social and emotional skills are taught from early childhood through early adulthood, but as we now know, the brain isn’t completely developed until the early to mid-20s (Jensen, 2006), and even fully mature adults are able to grow new neurons. Neither intellectual IQ nor social or emotional IQ is set at birth or in childhood. So although childhood and adolescence are the optimal times to nurture SEL, it is never too late to do so and should not be simply left to chance.

### **What Is SEL?**

Jonathan Cohen (1999), the director of the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE), explains that SEL is the development of “the skills and attitudes necessary to acquire social and emotional competencies” (p. 12). Daniel Goleman (1995), author of *Emotional Intelligence*, defines emotional competency as having the knowledge and skills that channel “behaviors toward a positive end . . . whether it be in controlling impulse and putting off gratification, regulating our moods [and emotions] so they facilitate rather than impede thinking, motivating ourselves to persist and try, try again in the face of setbacks, or finding ways to . . . perform more effectively” (p. 95). Yet, emotional intelligence cannot be isolated from social intelligence; almost all emotions have a social component: “You can’t separate the cause of an emotion from the world of relationships—our social interactions are what drive our emotions” (Goleman, 2006, p. 83). Social competency, then, involves our ability to navigate the world of human relationships, whereas emotional competency enables us to cope with the myriad emotions that relationships involve—and to do so with positive results.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as

the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to

- Recognize and manage their emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Demonstrate caring and concern for others
- Make responsible decisions
- Handle interpersonal situations effectively. (Payton et al., 2008, p. 4)

Simply stated, emotional learning is gaining the knowledge, the desire, and ability to use *intrapersonal* skills, whereas social learning is gaining the knowledge, the desire, and the ability to use *interpersonal* skills. In terms of character development, social and emotional learning enables and inspires character traits such as respect for self and others, personal and social responsibility, optimism, a strong work ethic, perseverance, compassion, cooperation, and honesty.

## What Research Says About SEL

More than ever before, educators are research driven. Fortunately, the latest research involving SEL (and character development in general) is compelling, positively affecting everything from students' individual health and wellness to significant increases in standardized test scores.

In *Smart & Good High Schools*, Lickona and Davidson (2005) report on their studies of the impact of character education in general on schools:

At every developmental level—elementary, middle, and high school—students who experienced quality character education programs outperformed comparison groups not only on measures of social behavior but also on measures of academic learning. There's an emerging body of hard evidence that we'll get an academic payoff when we invest in developing character as the foundation for excellence. (p. 211)

Indeed, since Lickona and Davidson's report, a hard body of evidence has continued to emerge. Most recently, a long-awaited report, the biggest study of its kind ever done, demonstrates the significant positive impact SEL can have