ALL LEARNING IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL

Helping Students Develop Essential Skills for the Classroom and Beyond

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CHAPTER 1

Learning That's Worthwhile

Learning. That's what school is about, right? Regardless of our role in the education system, we all care that students learn. And we spend countless hours trying to ensure that students *do* learn. But exactly *what* students are expected to learn in school has been debated for decades. What should we teach? What do students need to learn and be able to do?

In many circles, the answer is simple. Schools need to teach, and students need to master, the core academic subjects. After all, most accountability measures focus on English and mathematics and sometimes science and social studies. For schools to be "successful" in ratings and rankings, their students must perform well on academic measures of achievement. In these schools, every instructional minute is meant to focus on academic skill development.

In other circles, "worthwhile learning" is expanded to include vocational and workplace skills. For example, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1992) focused on one aspect of schooling they felt was missing: what they called the "learning a living" system. In addition to calling for basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, the SCANS report advocates focusing on the thinking skills necessary to put knowledge to work and the personal qualities that make workers dedicated and trustworthy.

Recognition and prioritization of skills that will be valuable in the workplace reflects a growing understanding that schools can influence more than

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just students' academic content knowledge. For example, California now includes "career pathways" as one of several ways students can demonstrate college and career readiness. In the new California accountability model, high school students must complete 300 hours of career and technical education coursework over three years to be considered "well prepared." Embedded in these courses are noncognitive skills such as working collaboratively with others to resolve problems, generating new products, communicating clearly, and making decisions with integrity. In other words, dispositions undergird the technical skills. These dispositions are aligned with industry competency skills outlined by the U.S. Department of Labor (SCANS, 1992).

In still other circles, worthwhile learning is understood to include mastery of social and emotional skills in additional to academic ones. Proponents of this wider view of learning—and obviously, we are among them—believe explicit instruction focused on the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEL) will result in improved academic learning.

To date, there have been limited efforts to address SEL in school accountability systems. In our home state of California, for example, suspension and expulsion rates are included in the multiple measures of school success. Some critics have argued that this encourages a too-permissive environment, where teachers and administrators are "soft on crime." Advocates counter that the ability to keep students in school is not just a valid *measure* of school success—it's an effective means of *increasing* it. In order to reduce suspensions and expulsions, schools must help students develop the social and emotional skills that will allow them to engage positively with one another, with their teachers, and with their learning.

A Closer Look at Social and Emotional Learning

SEL has been defined in a number of ways (see Humphrey et al., 2011). In general, it focuses on a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills that support success in school, the workplace, relationships, and the community.

Although these skills affect academic learning, they are often considered "soft skills" or personal attributes rather than explicit targets of instruction. In fact, however, we are teaching SEL even if we don't think we are doing

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so. As Berman, Chaffee, and Sarmiento (2018) note, "How we teach is as instructive as *what* we teach. Just as the culture of the classroom must reflect social belonging and emotional safety, so can academic instruction embody and enhance these competencies and be enhanced by them" (p. 13). Teachers communicate these values every time they step in front of a class.

Current efforts to address the social and emotional needs of students can be traced to the work of Waters and Sroufe (1983), who describe competence as the ability "to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to generate and capitalize on opportunities in the environment" (p. 80). In other words, competent people are adaptive, they respond to situations in appropriate ways, and they seek opportunities in their communities. Isn't that what we want our students to be able to do? Accordingly, it seems that schools should be invested in developing this type of skill set in students.

The thinking about SEL has evolved over the years. In 1997, Elias and colleagues suggested that SEL comprises a set of competencies, which Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) further described as the ability to

- Recognize and manage emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Appreciate the perspectives of others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships
- Make responsible decisions
- Handle interpersonal situations constructively (p. 406)

A few years later, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2005) identified five interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies:

- *Self-awareness*—the capacity to reflect on one's own feelings, values, and behaviors.
- *Social awareness*—the ability to view situations from another perspective, respect the social and cultural norms of others, and celebrate diversity.

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- *Relationship skills*—the ability to initiate and sustain positive connections with peers, teachers, families, and other groups.
- *Self-management*—the set of skills that includes self-motivation, goal setting, personal organization, self-discipline, impulse control, and use of strategies for coping with stress.
- *Responsible decision making*—the ability to make choices that consider the well-being of oneself and others.

Most recent to this publication, the Wallace Foundation model (see Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2018) identified three domains of SEL:

- *Cognitive regulation*—attention control, inhibitory control, working memory and planning, and cognitive flexibility.
- *Emotional processes*—emotion knowledge and expression, emotion and behavior regulation, and empathy or perspective taking.
- *Social/interpersonal skills*—understanding social cues, conflict resolution, and prosocial behavior.

Does SEL Belong in Schools?

Speaking of the Wallace Foundation, its work is guided by the principle "Say more only when you know more." In *All Learning Is Social and Emotional*, we have taken this advice to heart. Anyone who carefully follows the research on social and emotional learning is wise to avoid making too many definitive claims about its effect. However, one thing we *do* believe definitively is that classroom learning always includes cognitive, social, and emotional aspects.

As teachers, administrators, and consultants, we have worked with thousands of students and teachers over the years. We have worked across the general, special, and vocational curriculum in elementary, middle, and high schools, and in nearly every configuration of schooling. Based on these experiences and on our review of the research, we have concluded that because teachers unquestionably influence students' social and emotional development, they have a responsibility to do so in a way that is positive and deliberate.

As we described in the previous section, there are a number of ways to frame thinking about the social and emotional learning needs of students,

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and there have been hundreds of programs developed to support the effective development of social and emotional skills. Alongside the development of various approaches to SEL, there have been concurrent concerns about how best to formally integrate this aspect of learning into educators' work.

It makes sense to address three common questions about SEL before we go any farther.

Does Focusing on SEL Take Away from Academics?

It is true that there are only so many minutes that teachers get with students and that maximizing learning during those minutes is critical. Research suggests that time spent on SEL can facilitate academic learning (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004). As Jones and colleagues (2018) explain, "Children who are able to effectively manage their thinking, attention, and behavior are also more likely to have better grades and higher standardized test scores" (p. 15).

Put simply, when students develop prosocial behaviors and self-regulation skills, they learn more (e.g., Duncan et al., 2007); students with unaddressed problematic behavior learn less (Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001).

Do SEL Programs Co-opt the Role of Parents/Families?

The concern articulated here is that lessons related to SEL teach values. This is true; they do. But we would argue that values are, and have always been, a component of schooling. When a teacher selects a specific book to teach, that choice communicates values. When a teacher responds to a question, the way in which she does so communicates values. When a teacher has students line up boy-girl-boy-girl, this practice communicates values. Schools, and the adults in them and associated with them, intentionally and unintentionally convey their values, morals, and beliefs in every lesson taught. This is an aspect of the *hidden curriculum* (which we will discuss in the next section). It is the reason there is oversight and review. It's why we have school boards and curriculum committees.

When schools and teachers take on SEL in a public and transparent way, the community (including parents and families) can monitor and critique these efforts.

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Does SEL Create Groupthink and Uniformity?

Episodically over the years, we have heard SEL described as "communist" or "socialist," and frankly, we remain surprised by this perspective. There is no single way of thinking that is privileged in schools, and SEL programs are no exception. There are appropriate ways of behaving, and there are ways that our society has defined manners and social mores, each with all kinds of nuances and variations.

We believe that efforts to help students grow and develop socially and emotionally, far from being driven by a political agenda, are an indication of teachers working very hard to facilitate the skills their students need to be productive members of society.

SEL as Curriculum

Much of the controversy surrounding SEL seems rooted in concerns about an SEL curriculum's potential to shape students' thinking. In order to explore SEL in the classroom directly, we first need to consider the aspects of *curriculum* as explained by George Posner, one of the world's experts on curriculum theory.

Posner believes that there are at least five levels of any curriculum:

- *The official curriculum*, or written curriculum, gives the basic lesson plan to be followed, including objectives, sequence, and materials. This provides the basis for accountability.
- *The operational curriculum* is what is taught by the teacher, and how it is communicated. This includes what the teacher teaches in class and the learning outcomes for the student.
- *The hidden curriculum* includes the norms and values of the surrounding society. These are stronger and more durable than the first two, and may be in conflict with them.
- *The null curriculum* consists of what is not taught. Consideration must be given to the reasons behind why things are not included in the official or operational curriculum.
- *The extra curriculum* is the planned experiences outside of the specific educational session. (1992, pp. 10–12)

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SEL has long existed in the hidden curriculum. This is evidenced any time an adult says, "Boys don't cry" or "Say thank you." Students are learning socially and emotionally all the time, but some of this learning is not productive. If SEL remains part of the hidden curriculum, there will be gaps in students' learning. For example, if students are not directly taught self-regulation strategies, those who have yet to develop these strategies might be marginalized. Teachers might say that a specific student is off task a lot, or distracted, or can't focus. This is an example of the student being blamed for not mastering something he or she was never taught. When all students have been taught self-regulation, teachers can remind them of the strategies to use. As Posner (1992) notes,

> Everything that happens to students influences their lives, and therefore, the curriculum must be considered extremely broadly, not only in terms of what can be planned for students in schools and even outside them, but also in terms of all the unanticipated consequences of each new situation that individuals encounter. The consequences of any situation include not only how it is learned in a formal sense, but also all the thoughts, feelings, and tendencies to action that the situation engenders in those individuals experiencing it. But since each individual differs in at least some small ways from all others, no two individuals can experience the same situation in precisely the same way. (p. 51)

Recognizing SEL as an official component of curriculum allows teachers to operationalize it in their classrooms. Of course, this also opens SEL to the kinds of curricular debates that surround other content areas, including phonics in English language arts, evolution in science, Christopher Columbus in social studies, and procedures versus concepts in math. Any content that is valued as an important part of the schooling experience will be the subject of passionate and differing viewpoints and shaped by the arguments that emerge. In our view, SEL is worthy of the same type of ongoing rigorous debate that has given us the academic curricula that exist today, and like academic curricula, SEL will continue evolving over time.

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