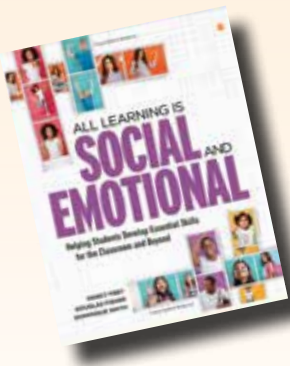




LEADING

A Social Emotional Learning Environment

By Dominique Smith



Social emotional learning (SEL) is hot. There's no question about it. And there's good reason for that. **Every interaction that educators have with children and youth provides an opportunity to build students' social and emotional skills.** But when something is hot, there is a risk that it is seen as a fad. When something in education is a fad, it is often seen as one more thing that teachers, who are already stretched pretty thin, have to add. Or worse, there are minimal compliance attempts to say, "We do that, too." In these cases, students fail to benefit and teachers come to believe that this too shall pass.

The thing is, social and emotional learning is already happening in your school. It lives in the hidden curriculum, out of sight and out of mind, but happening nonetheless. If all of these hidden curriculum messages were positive, we wouldn't need to focus attention on it. But they're not. Much of the social and emotional learning students experience is counter to the goals of growing young people who have the skills they need to function in a complex social society. Take, for example, a comment someone recently made in response to an egregious act of a couple of students: "Boys will be boys." No. Boys will be what they are taught. And if they are not taught that bullying and inappropriate touching are wrong, they won't learn it.

Here's a seemingly more benign example. Two students on the playground get into an argument. Feelings are hurt. One of the students is crying and the other is very angry, at least by the look on his face. The adult on duty says to one of the students, "You're okay. There's no need to cry." And to the other, "She didn't mean it. You took it the wrong way. Now let it go." In both cases, students' emotions were discounted. They did not have the opportunity to label their emotions or learn appropriate responses to those emotions. Instead, they were encouraged to repress their emotions, not talk about it, and move on. Yes, social and emotional learning is happening all of the time in your school, but it's not always positive.

So why SEL? SEL is an effort to focus on the whole child, recognizing that children (like all of us) are complex social beings. SEL shouldn't feel like another addition to a teacher's workload but rather another tool for supporting the growth of each individual student.

In my work with my coauthors Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher on our book, *All Learning Is Social and Emotional: Helping Students Develop Essential Skills for the Classroom and Beyond*, we developed what we believe are the five tenets of SEL:

1. Identity and Agency

Children's and adolescents' sense of identity is shaped by a myriad of factors, including experiences in and out of

school. Likewise, their agency, which is their belief in their own ability to influence the world around them, is materially governed by their identity. Over time, students develop a mindset that they are learners who strive and persevere through challenge.

2. Emotional Regulation

Young people need to understand that emotions happen, and some of those emotions negatively affect the individual and those around him or her. Emotional self regulation requires the habits of self-checking and moderating response. Students learn how to manage their behavior by accurately identifying their emotions, engaging in impulse control, and developing coping skills.

3. Cognitive Regulation

Successful students need to develop the habits and dispositions to regulate their own learning. Students learn to think about their thinking (metacognition), focus their attention, set and monitor goals, recognize and resolve problems, make decisions, and develop their organizational skills.

4. Social Skills and Relationships

Children and adolescents engage in relationship building, and learn what it means to be a friend and a classmate. To do so requires developing empathy, as well as pro-social skills such as sharing and teamwork, which allow productive collaboration to occur. And it requires that students learn to repair the harm they cause to others.

5. Public Spirit

This is the basis for a democracy, as we create communities in which people are valued and treated fairly. Public spirit involves the development of students'

character, their respect for others, ethical responsibilities, a sense of justice, perseverance in the face of injustice, and leadership.

These five areas are directly influenced, positively or negatively, by the adults who work in a school building. As leaders of schools, we should be targeting these tenets with purpose, supporting teachers to understand the ideas, and developing strategies for implementation.

For example, many students walk our campuses displaying an identity that is truly not them. Students walk around with labels such as bad kid, late kid, disruptive kid, and smart kid based on everything the adults have told them during their educational journey. As these students start to hear more and more language from the adults, their identity starts to change and they become accustomed to acting a certain way that is consistent with the story that is told about them. In other words, they live up to the identity that has been assigned. As a school leader, I ask you to examine areas on your campus that allow for identities to be built in a negative way. Observe how students are treated when they show up late. Is it with a smile and thank-you for being here or is it shame and humiliation? Do your staff tell students, "You're late"? Hint: the student already knows that. Or do your staff ask if everything is okay and how they can help the young person get closer and closer to arriving on time? That may seem to be a minor thing, but students report that the initial interactions they have with adults influence how they act throughout the day.

Further, I encourage you to assess how your teachers address students who misbehave in class. Do they have a system of understanding and searching for what is happening to that student or is it purely punitive and reactive? Leaders must help guide teachers into a different realm of thinking when working with our students who exhibit problematic behavior. Asking staff to be more proactive and relationship focused isn't adding more time to the teachers' workday but rather granting permission to teachers for them to use

their precious instructional minutes to support the student in any aspect they need. As we walk through classrooms our hopes should be that students are learning and that our teachers are making significant impacts on our students' lives. We should be getting to a place where our school shifts from saying, "What's wrong with that student?" to the language of "What happened to that student?" When students misbehave, they need to understand their emotional state and the actions that would be more pro-social when in that state. Of course, there are logical consequences for problematic behavior but simply punishing a student, or threatening to punish them in an effort to get them to comply, does not teach them how to behave in the future. The key is for students to learn that their actions – behavior – impacts other people. When students have positive, growth-producing relationships with teachers and then do something wrong, they want to repair those relationships. Over time, and with feedback, student behavior begins to change in significant ways.

Speaking of relationships, when you visit classrooms don't limit your focus to instruction. Consider the ways in which your teachers develop, maintain, and repair relationships with students and themselves and with students and their peers. The research on this is clear: young people do not learn from old people they do not like. I understand that it is probably more comfortable to focus on instructional routines and to coach a teacher who does not know how to read aloud or model mathematical problem solving, but it's equally important to support all teachers in developing strong relationships with students. At the most basic level, does the teacher know the students' names? How to pronounce those names? Know at least one personal thing about each student? Beyond that, do teachers greet students, acknowledge students, demonstrate empathy, and have high expectations for students? And are all students treated with respect? There has been evidence for several decades that teachers treat students differently based on their expectations for those students, which are commonly based

on students' achievement (e.g., Good, 1987).

The low-achieving students:

- Get less wait time.
- Are criticized more often for failure.
- Are praised less frequently.
- Receive less feedback.
- Are called on less often.
- Are seated further away from the teacher.
- Have less eye contact from the teacher.
- Have fewer friendly interactions with the teacher.
- Have their ideas accepted less often.

Look for these student experiences in classrooms as you visit because the students who are lower achieving and who are treated this way are likely to learn way less. In that case, the Matthew Effect is in full force: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The lack of a strong relationship with the teacher and low expectations from the teacher stunt learning.

Relationships are complex and sometimes harmed. When that happens, do teachers work to repair those relationships? Teachers need help, often in the form of professional learning and role playing, to learn to talk to students who have hurt their feelings. Teachers need to be comfortable telling students that their feelings have been hurt or that they are frustrated. This is not an opportunity for teachers to yell at students, saying "you did this" and "you did that," but rather an opportunity for students to hear the impact that their actions have had and to be provided an opportunity to make amends. Along the way, students and teachers learn very valuable social skills.

Thus far, I have focused on the social and emotional development of children and youth, but as the leader you are probably already thinking about the skills the adults in your school have relative to their social and emotional lives. Perhaps you have a teacher with poor social skills. Or a teacher with an inability to regulate

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emotionally. Or a staff member who has a negative sense of self and identity. The reality is that your role is to also develop the social and emotional skills of the adults in the building. It's not just one more thing to worry about. It is the thing. It is the thing that creates the culture at your school that allows learning to happen. It is the thing that improves staff morale and reduces burnout and turnover. And it is the thing that helps people live happier lives.

I think that the same five tenets that we proposed for students also apply to the adults in the school system. As an example, let's focus on agency. Teachers with a limited sense of agency burn out and leave the profession. But before they do, they can be a toxic part of the staff. And their students are probably not learning much from them. Agency is the belief that when you act upon the world, good things happen. It's about having an impact and linking actions with outcomes.

How can you help teachers develop a stronger sense of agency? One way is to help them recognize that their instructional efforts are paying off, even if there are only currently small wins. Teachers tend to focus on the gaps in student learning and when there are many students who have unfinished learning, teachers can feel overwhelmed and come to believe that their efforts are fruitless. If the teacher is having an impact on students, academically, behaviorally, socially, or whatever, they might need help recognizing it. When you, the school leader, pay attention to the interim successes, naming and celebrating them, teachers can start to develop their agency. And when there are bigger wins, those need to be celebrated (and attributed) as well. Further, when teachers make rec-

ommendations for improvement of the school, listen carefully. If none of their suggestions are valued or implement-



ed, their sense of agency can also be compromised. I'm not suggesting that everything each teacher recommends can be tried, but learn to listen and find things that can be done. And make sure that the person who suggested it in the first place knows that his or her ideas are being considered. Building teacher agency is worth your time.

Remember, social and emotional learning is happening in your school. Some of the lessons teach students how to grow and develop as humans invested in the betterment of their community. Others, not so much. You can change this. You can support teachers

to integrate intentional and targeted social and emotional learning for their students. And when you do, students come to understand relationships, emotions, behavior, and learning in a whole new way.

DOMINIQUE SMITH is the chief of educational services and teacher support at Health Sciences High and Middle College in California. He is responsible for the overall instructional program as well as creating and maintaining the school climate and culture, working with the faculty and staff to ensure the education of the whole child.

Smith is the coauthor of numerous books and he is also a national trainer for the International Institute on Restorative Practices, and member of ASCD's FIT Teaching® (Framework for Intentional and Targeted Teaching®) Cadre.

RESOURCES

Frey, N., Fisher, D., and Smith, D. (2019). *All learning is social and emotional: Helping students develop essential skills for the classroom and beyond*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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