I recently read a quote attributed to Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch watchmaker who helped many Jews escape the Nazis during World War II: “In order to realize the worth of the anchor, we need to feel the stress of the storm.” Her words moved me with their simplicity, their imagery, and their application to the times we find ourselves in today.

Today we all feel the stress of the storm. But, as educators, what is our anchor? My answer is the prosocial skills that we are working to foster in our students—skills that will steady and serve them in life’s inevitable storms.

Prosocial skills are skills that we use to help other people. They include: concern for others, feeling empathy, and behaving in ways that support or benefit others. We highlight these skills here because they contribute most directly to the ways in which we create caring classrooms and foster relationships among students. They are also skills that can be directly integrated into the fabric of our teaching.

I invite you to contemplate which prosocial skills you believe are most important to foster in your students. Is it taking the perspective of others? Communicating clearly? Seeking and offering help when needed? As you read this blog post, ask yourself: How might I incorporate the development of these skills into my teaching with even greater intention?

I hope this blog inspires you to help your students understand that the storms of 2020—literal hurricanes and fires, a global pandemic, the sudden shift to distance learning, economic crisis, structural racism—are crucibles that have the power to refine and strengthen their prosocial skills.

Schools Are Still Social Places—Even in a Pandemic

The pioneering social reformer and educator John Dewey espoused a belief that “education has the scope of equipping a child with social competence. Unless this link is made, education is useless (p. 193).”[1] Were Dewey to glimpse the modifications that have become pervasive in education over the last six months, he would likely be wide-eyed at the creative adaptations teachers have made to continue equipping their students with this social competence. I think of my husband teaching his kindergartners on Zoom and ending many online lessons with a magic trick. Out of his fledgling efforts, many in his remote community of learners developed the confidence to volunteer to share their own magic tricks with the group.
I also consider the recent blog by Timothy Shanahan who espouses frequent use of online polling to maintain engagement and simulate the in-person discussion that students would otherwise engage in.

And finally, I marvel at the ease with which teachers have embraced the use of Zoom break-out rooms to afford students the opportunity to have small group conversations in which they share their ideas, see a concept in a new light, and even change their thinking.

Teachers have been courageously modifying their practice in order to ensure their students’ continued academic and social growth, evidence of the durability of Dewey’s conviction that schools are meant to be social places (even during a time of social distancing).

Let’s consider three examples of teaching practices and lesson ideas you might use during the first weeks of school to build the social competence that CASEL categorizes as social awareness and relationships skills.

**Developing Empathy**

Students who have empathy can recognize and name their feelings, imagine how others feel, and understand that other people have feelings similar to their own. After a read-aloud, students could be asked to pair up with another student to share a time they experienced a particular feeling experienced by a character in the story.

Or you might cut pictures out of magazines that capture people showing different emotions and invite students to imagine how the people in each picture feel. How do they know? At the conclusion of either activity, bring students together to reflect on the question, “How will it help our class community if we pay attention to how other people feel?”

**Problem Solving**

One hope we hear from teachers around the country is that students will develop a sense of competence and independence. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than when it comes to solving problems. You might set aside time for students to consider why conflicts are a normal part of life, suggest advice they’d give for solving particular conflicts, and reflect on how their learning community might be harmed should they leave a conflict unresolved.

Engaging in this conversation affords students the opportunity to be heard, to consider differing opinions, and to navigate the role they each play in creating and maintaining a positive community. By empowering and validating student voice and competence, teachers convey their belief that students will become independent problem solvers.

**Perspective Taking**

Teachers often ask students to consider the perspectives of others in an academic sense, perhaps by asking them to write an alternative ending to a story based on what they understand about the main character, or imagining how an historical event such as the ratification of women’s right to vote might have been experienced by different groups of people.

Students can also practice the art of perspective taking in a more personal way, such as by considering the impact of their words on the classroom community. By encouraging students to discuss why it’s important to speak kindly to others, and creating scenarios in which they imagine how they could make their classmates feel better by what they choose to say, teachers can help infuse perspective taking across the school day.
We invite you to explore our Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit for additional ideas on supporting students’ prosocial skill development.

**Prioritizing Prosocial Skills Beyond the First Few Weeks**

How might we use John Dewey’s vision of schools as places where students are equipped with social competence as a compass to guide us this school year? As my colleague Peter and I suggested earlier in this blog series, one challenge we’re all facing is determining which SEL essentials to prioritize. The beauty of making time to address the development of prosocial skills is that it covers two out of three of the essentials outlined in that blog: building relationships and integrating SEL instruction to make sure it applies to academics.

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As you settle into new routines over the next several weeks, you might ask yourself, “What did I do today to prepare my students to be involved citizens and stewards of the next generation?” or simply, “What did my students and I do today to make our classroom a kinder and more empathetic place?” Either reflection—macro or micro—is setting you on the path toward more intentional development of students’ prosocial skills.

Whether you integrate the building of prosocial skills into your literacy curriculum, or provide students with tangible opportunities each day to learn and apply prosocial skills in service of strengthening their learning community, you are fortifying your students’ anchors so they are ready for whatever storm awaits.

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*In case you missed it, read the Introduction to this four-part blog series, SEL Essentials: Reimagining Our Social and Emotional Learning Priorities.*