

A Moral Imperative: Social and Emotional Learning

By Mary Tavegia | Categories: Social-Emotional Learning



Much has been written about the divisive discourse that seems to permeate our nation today. Friends, colleagues, and even families find it difficult to have thoughtful, meaningful conversations on important topics when opinions are strong, voices are loud, and listening seems to be a lost skill. While diversity of thought is essential to progress, it seems that the struggle to allow for divergent thinking is growing and threatens our solidarity as a nation.

Historically, public schools have been the place where citizens have learned the tenets of democracy, laws, and traditions. Public schools continue to hold that responsibility and, given the changes and challenges that we are now facing, it is time to consider an approach to education that has a greater potential to develop citizens who are committed to creating a world that works for all.

How Can Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Help?

Fortunately, more and more schools across the country have been looking to the growing field of social and emotional learning to address the need to create learning environments that are focused on the development of **self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making**. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” A key component of this definition is that SEL is a *process*, one that requires consistent acquisition and application. Everyone can grow and change to develop the competencies necessary to successfully cultivate and participate in a fair, democratic society.

There is a strong and growing body of evidence to support the benefits of SEL. A meta-analysis of 213 studies of schools that implemented evidence-based SEL programming found student gains in social-emotional skill development; improved attitudes about themselves, others, and school; more positive classroom behavior; and an 11-percentile-point gain on standardized achievement tests (Durlak et al. 2011). This compelling data justifies educators’ time spent in professional learning about the foundations of SEL as well

as the classroom investment in time needed to implement SEL programs and structures.

Researchers at The Aspen Institute working under the aegis of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development concluded that learning by its very nature is both social and emotional. In their consensus statements of evidence published as *The Evidence Base for How We Learn*, Stephanie Jones and Jennifer Kahn wrote, "Social, emotional, and academic development . . . can transform schools into places that foster academic excellence, collaboration and communication, creativity and innovation, empathy and respect, civic engagement, and other skills and dispositions needed for success in the 21st century."

Self-awareness and Social Awareness

Beyond increasing the capacity to learn, social-emotional skills help students come to a deeper understanding about themselves. Self-aware students can identify and name their own emotions and know what triggers them. As students learn about themselves, they also build a sense of social awareness, so they can recognize how their emotions might affect others. Through social awareness, students develop an understanding of and appreciation for the similarities and differences that are inherent in a diverse community. At this time in our country, many are struggling to understand or even acknowledge the ideas and opinions of others. By intentionally teaching students to listen deeply and respond respectfully, even in disagreement, the tone of the classroom, and hopefully society, will become one that is more open, empathetic, and accepting.

Self-management

The competency of self-management first brings to mind the ability to regulate emotions and develop self-control, and those are important aspects. There is more to self-management, however: there is the ability to set and work toward goals with resolve and determination while remaining positive when progress toward those goals is slow. Self-management is about being able to look at the long term and to persevere, maintaining optimism even in difficult times. It can be challenging to feel hopeful about our country right now considering the headlines that highlight the anger and anguish felt by so many.

While all of the social-emotional competencies come into play when communicating with others, self-management is particularly important when speaking with others about divisive topics. It may be arduous to regulate our emotions when discussing deeply held beliefs with those who do not share similar viewpoints. We must learn to listen carefully without interrupting, to consider the thinking of others, and to remain confident that we can come to some shared agreements that will help us to overcome the obstacles we see before us and to strive to achieve the positive ideals that our nation was built upon.

Classroom meetings that offer opportunities for students to develop and apply self-management skills as they learn to listen carefully to one another, to accept that others may think differently about a similar topic, and to set goals for positive interpersonal interactions are making a difference in how students communicate and learn from one another. Listen in as partners in a classroom meeting discuss the impact that teasing has on others and hear how they plan to make things right when they have hurt a classmate's feelings.

Video: Partners Talk About Teasing

Relationship Skills



Positive, caring relationships among the teachers and students in the classroom are at the heart of learning. These relationships, when developed and maintained with intention and care, enhance the school climate and culture, build connection to the school, and can serve as a model for future relationships. Learning the skills necessary to develop and maintain relationships, particularly when there is conflict, needs to be a focus in every classroom. As we see all around us, the need to bridge understanding and appreciation for differences, to build collaboration over competition, and to build communication skills that allow for multiple viewpoints is vast and growing. Classrooms that are designed around developing relationship skills become learning environments that will also build both academic and social skills.

In this video, two students who had no connection to each other were partnered for a collaborative learning task. Their insights about learning from each other were probably more important than the academic skills they gained at this moment, although both were significant. Video: Partners Talk About Collaboration

Responsible Decision-making

Thirty-five thousand. According to Dr. Joel Hoomans in the *Leading Edge Journal* (2015), this is the number of decisions an adult makes every day. Many decisions are small in scope: *Shall I wear the white shirt or the blue one?* Others may carry great consequences: *Shall I accept that job offer?* How do we decide? Responsible decisions usually involve self-reflection, a weighing of alternatives, and a consideration of how this decision will impact others. Meanwhile, Hoomans reports that a child makes three thousand decisions every day. How do we help children learn to make decisions now so they will be ready to handle ten times that burden when they are adults? We need to help children learn to self-reflect, to look at decisions from multiple viewpoints. We must help children understand that decisions have consequences and that they need to consider the ethics and impact of their choices. Some schools address this by offering students more opportunities to take developmentally appropriate control of their classroom, by giving students the autonomy to set goals and plan how to achieve them, and by broadening students' understanding of how their decisions affect their peers, their school, and their community. Approaches to developing the process of responsible decision-making may take the form of class meetings, sessions on mindfulness, or social studies lessons that evaluate the effects of decisions.

Creating a Caring Learning Community

Students should be engaged in learning throughout their day. High-quality, rigorous lessons should meet academic standards and keep students engaged in learning. Considering the social-emotional needs of students, lessons can be planned that will blend the academic and the social learning that students need to become bright, active citizens. These citizens will know how to collaborate respectfully, to accept new ideas, and to develop a better understanding of themselves and their peers. By fostering a caring

community of learners who can openly share their thinking, embrace differences as learning opportunities, and express divergent opinions with respect for the ideas of others, teachers can directly affect the future of our schools and ultimately our country. It is our moral imperative.

References

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