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## The Connection Between Academic and Social- Emotional Learning

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In every society, children will inherit social roles now occupied by adults. Our schools have the job of preparing children for this eventual responsibility. Therefore, around the world, people want to improve education. The pages of education newsletters, newspapers, magazines, books, and journals are filled with many different ideas about what should be emphasized. However, there are some areas of growing consensus. Numerous polls of parents and community leaders indicate clearly what we want our children to know and be able to do, and this defines what we want schools to teach. We want young people to

- be fully literate and able to benefit from and make use of the power of written and spoken language, in various forms and media;
- understand mathematics and science at levels that will prepare them for the world of the future and strengthen their ability to think critically, carefully, and creatively;

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- be good problem solvers;
- take responsibility for their personal health and well-being;
- develop effective social relationships, such as learning how to work in a group and how to understand and relate to others from different cultures and backgrounds;
- be caring individuals with concern and respect for others;
- understand how their society works and be prepared to take on the roles that are necessary for future progress; and
- develop good character and make sound moral decisions.

All of these are aspects of what some refer to as the “education of the whole child.” This is not a new idea; it is rooted in the writings and teachings of many ancient cultures. Yet achieving the kind of balance that encourages all children to learn, work, and contribute to their fullest potential has been a continuing challenge as our world has grown more complex and our communities more fragmented.

The final six points on the previous list refer to aspects of education that have been referred to as character education, service learning, citizenship education, and emotional intelligence. All of these can be expressed in the single term, *social-emotional learning* (SEL), and it is this form of education, when added to academic learning, that provides educators with the possibility of capturing the balance children need.

Since balance is necessary, efforts that elevate some factors at the expense of others are doomed to failure. A moment’s reflection reveals how obvious this is. For children to become literate, responsible, nonviolent, drug-free, and caring adults, those of us who are educators, parents, business leaders, and policymakers must think cohesively and carefully about how to address this challenge and not divert attention to other goals.

Experience and research show that each element of this challenge can be enhanced by thoughtful, sustained, and systematic attention to the social-emotional skills of children (Greenberg et al., 2003). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; [www.CASEL.org](http://www.CASEL.org)) has identified a set of social-emotional skills that underlie effective performance of a wide range of social roles and life tasks. CASEL has drawn from extensive research in a wide range of areas, including brain functioning and methods of learning and instruction to identify the skills that provide young people with broad guidance and direction for their actions in all aspects of their lives, in and out of school (Connell, Turner, Mason & Olsen, 1986; Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 2000; Elias et al., 1997; Goleman, 1995; Topping & Bremner, 1998; Zins, Weissberg, Walberg, & Wang, 2004). The skills are presented in Table 1.1.

Schools worldwide must give children intellectual and practical tools they can bring to their classrooms, families, and communities. SEL provides many of these tools. It is a way of teaching and organizing classrooms and schools that helps children learn a set of skills needed to successfully manage life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, communicating effectively, being sensitive to others’ needs, and getting along with others. When schools implement high-quality SEL programs and approaches effectively, academic achievement of children increases, incidence of problem behaviors decreases, the relationships that surround each child are improved, and the climate of classrooms and schools changes for the better.

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**Table 1.1** The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's Essential Skills for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning

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### Know Yourself and Others

- Identify feelings—recognizing and labeling one's feelings
- Be responsible—understanding one's obligation to engage in ethical, safe, legal behaviors
- Recognize strengths—identifying and cultivating one's positive qualities

### Make Responsible Decisions

- Manage emotions—regulating feelings so that they aid rather than impede the handling of situations
- Understand situations—accurately understanding the circumstances one is in
- Set goals and plans—establishing and working toward achievement of specific short- and long-term outcomes
- Solve problems creatively—engaging in a creative, disciplined process of exploring alternative possibilities that leads to responsible, goal-directed action, including overcoming obstacles to plans

### Care for Others

- Show empathy—identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others
- Respect others—believing that others deserve to be treated with kindness and compassion as part of our shared humanity
- Appreciate diversity—understanding that individual and group differences complement one another and add strength and adaptability to the world around us

### Know How to Act

- Communicate effectively—using verbal and nonverbal skills to express oneself and promote effective exchanges with others
  - Build relationships—establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding connections with individuals and groups
  - Negotiate fairly—achieving mutually satisfactory resolutions to conflict by addressing the needs of all concerned
  - Refuse provocations—conveying and following through effectively with one's decision not to engage in unwanted, unsafe, unethical behavior
  - Seek help—identifying the need for and accessing appropriate assistance and support in pursuit of needs and goals
  - Act ethically—guiding decisions and actions by a set of principles or standards derived from recognized legal and professional codes or moral or faith-based systems of conduct
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SEL is sometimes called “the missing piece,” because it represents a part of education that links academic knowledge with a specific set of skills important to success in schools, families, communities, workplaces, and life in general. As national and world events continue to teach, there is a danger to each of us—locally and globally—when children grow up with knowledge but without social-emotional skills and a strong moral compass. Hence, a combination of academic learning and SEL is the true standard for effective education for the world as we now face it.

There are eight elements of SEL that create the strong connection with academic learning. These are supported collectively by the entire body of research cited in this chapter. But they are all based on one fundamental principle:

**Effective, lasting academic learning and SEL are built on caring relationships and warm but challenging classroom and school environments.**

There is abundant research in support of the idea that students are most responsive academically to classrooms and schools that are not threatening to students and challenge them to learn more but do so in ways that do not discourage them (e.g., Kriete & Bechtel, 2002; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996; O'Neil, 1997; Osterman, 2000; Zins et al., 2004). Also, these schools are places where students feel cared about, welcomed, valued, and seen as more than just learners—they are seen as resources.

In this kind of caring climate, educators can work on providing the eight elements necessary for the kind of academic-social-emotional balance that will lead students to success in school and life:

1. Link social-emotional instruction to other school services.
2. Use goal setting to focus instruction.
3. Use differentiated instructional procedures.
4. Promote community service to build empathy.
5. Involve parents.
6. Build social-emotional skills gradually and systematically.
7. Prepare and support staff well.
8. Evaluate what you do.

What follows is a brief explanation for each of these eight aspects to help underscore their importance and interrelationship. Although teachers cannot impact all of these elements in their daily roles, they can do so directly in many areas. In others, their awareness, advocacy, and leadership can be a source of positive change in their schools.

## **LINK SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL INSTRUCTION TO OTHER SCHOOL SERVICES**

Social-emotional and life skills must be taught explicitly at the elementary and secondary levels. Like reading or math, if social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not be internalized and become part of a child's lifelong repertoire of valued activities. Although this is necessary, CASEL research would suggest it is not sufficient (Elias et al., 1997). Children also benefit from coordinated, explicit, developmentally sensitive instruction in the prevention of specific problems, such as smoking, drug use, alcohol, pregnancy, violence, and bullying. Obviously, different communities and cultures will select and focus on preventing different problem behaviors. Perhaps of greatest importance and relevance to each teacher, children benefit from explicit guidance in finding a healthy lifestyle. Eating

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habits, sleeping patterns, and study and work environments are among the areas that are important to promoting academic learning and SEL.

Finally, schools should be attentive to difficult life events that befall students and try to provide them with support and coping strategies at those troubling moments. Typically, such assistance is not given until children show problems that are the result of those difficult life events; unfortunately, during this time, many students are distracted from learning. Even when they are not actively disrupting class, they are not taking in all that their teachers are working so hard to provide. Providing social-emotional assistance to children facing difficult events is a sound prevention strategy that also promotes better academic learning. Children with special education needs must also receive social-emotional skill-building instruction and be included in related activities (Adelman & Taylor, 2000; Comer, Ben-Avie, Haynes, & Joyner, 1999; Elias et al., 1997; Jessor, 1993; Perry & Jessor, 1985).

### USE GOAL SETTING TO FOCUS INSTRUCTION

Children are required to learn many things, but without a sense of connection between and to those things, children are not likely to retain what they learn and use it in their lives. When their learning is presented in terms of understandable goals (goals that children can play a larger role in defining as they get older), children become more engaged and focused and less likely to exhibit behavior problems. Learning experiences that coordinate and integrate different aspects of learning across subject areas and over time, as well as those that link to their lives outside of school in the present and future, are especially valuable.

Children also benefit from learning problem-solving strategies that they can apply to new situations that face them. Instruction in reading that includes examining the problem-solving and decision-making processes used by various characters in stories, as well as history and current events instruction that allows students to focus on the different perspectives of individuals and groups involved and the problem-solving processes they used (or might have used), is particularly enriching. A similar process can be used to help students understand the process of scientific and mathematical problem solving. When this takes place, students find that as they encounter new books, new civic situations, and new group processes, they will have strategies to apply that enhance their learning and performance and enable them to make better progress (Cohen, 1999; Elias & Bruene, 2005; Elias et al., 1997; Pasi, 2001; Topping & Bremner, 1998).

### USE DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES

Academic learning and SEL take place best in different ways for different students. So educational experiences marked by instruction that uses different modalities are most likely to reach all children and allow them to build their skills and feel that the classroom environment is suited to their preferred way of learning. Modalities include modeling, role playing, making art, dancing, performing drama, working with materials and manipulatives, and using digital media, computer technology,

and the Internet. Also important for sound instruction are regular and constructive feedback, discussions that include open-ended questioning, opportunities for student reflection, project-based learning, and frequent reminders to use social-emotional skills in all aspects of school life. Furthermore, differentiated instruction also recognizes the value of varying content, work processes, products, scoring systems, assessments, time, and grouping arrangements to meet student needs.

It is important to note that the pedagogy of sound SEL is not distinct from other sound pedagogy. Teachers should draw some reassurance from this, in that SEL does not demand dramatic changes in their roles or actions. However, the small changes that are required can produce quite dramatic and profound results, especially as children are exposed to SEL over a period of years (Gardner, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Ladd & Mize, 1983; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Noddings, 1992; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997; Topping, 2000).

## PROMOTE COMMUNITY SERVICE TO BUILD EMPATHY

Community service plays an essential role in fostering generalization of SEL skills, particularly in building empathy. Properly conducted community service, which begins at the earliest level of schooling and continues throughout all subsequent years, provides an opportunity for children to learn life skills, integrate them, apply them, reflect on them, and then demonstrate them. This process solidifies their learning and also provides a climate in which others are more likely to engage in community service. Service experiences usually help students encounter other people, ideas, and circumstances in ways that broaden their sense of perspective and build empathic understanding and caring connections to the world around them. For many young people, community service provides an opportunity to nourish a universal need to be a generous and contributing member of important groups to which one belongs. This helps prepare children for their eventual roles in the larger society, as well as work and family groups of which they will be a part. Furthermore, it helps nurture the spirit of students to see themselves as part of a larger world, with sets of ideals and beliefs that are important to living a fulfilled life.

It is worth noting that service opportunities can be embedded in classrooms and schools so that even from the youngest age, students feel that they are making a contribution to the positive functioning of the classroom. Examples include putting chairs away, cleaning up, and helping the teacher and other students. As children get older, this can be augmented by opportunities for students to take on helpful roles in the community. Examples include improving the physical environment around the school, helping the elderly, and providing comfort and support to the injured or sick. Such opportunities begin with *preparation*, so that students understand the circumstances they will be involved with, such as the kinds of illnesses and difficulties that beset the elderly. Then, there is the *action* of carrying out the service, in which students should be as directly involved as is appropriate to their age and safety. Action is followed by *reflection*, as students have a chance to talk or write about what they experienced and their feelings about it. Finally, *demonstration* of learning should take place, as students creatively show their peers, younger students, parents, and other groups in the community what they did, why they did it, how they felt about it, and what they learned (Berman, 1997; Billig, 2000; National Commission on Service Learning, 2002).

## INVOLVE PARENTS

Parents, schools, the community, and the larger society all agree that children's life success depends on building all forms of literacy, including social-emotional skills. When home and school collaborate closely to implement SEL programs, students gain more and program effects are more enduring and pervasive. As more and more children are being bombarded by messages of mass culture, Internet, television, music, videos, and other outlets unfiltered by adults, it becomes more and more important that key caregivers in children's lives send strong and coordinated messages. For this reason, school and community resources need to be mobilized to help parents provide home environments conducive to learning. This is the most fundamental form of parental involvement in the education of their children. Some examples include giving parents regular overviews of the academic and social-emotional skills students are learning at any given time, arranging opportunities for parents to meet to exchange ideas about how to support teaching in school and how to raise their children, helping parents learn how to organize the morning routine and homework routines to minimize conflict, and communicating with parents the importance of having positive times with their children, despite difficulties, to build children's sense of hope.

Such efforts will not occur adequately, especially in low-performing schools, without systematic and ongoing guidance and support from teachers and other school personnel (Christenson & Havsy, 2003; Elias et al., 2000; Epstein, 2001; Huang & Gibbs, 1992).

## BUILD SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS GRADUALLY AND SYSTEMATICALLY

Selecting and implementing an approach to SEL should follow consideration of local needs, goals, interests, and mandates; staff skills, workload, and receptiveness; preexisting instructional efforts and activities; the content and quality of program materials; its developmental appropriateness and sociocultural appropriateness to the range of recipient student populations; and its acceptability to parents and community members. SEL efforts are often implemented as pilot projects, and it typically takes 2 to 3 years for staff to have a confident and competent sense of ownership of the approaches being used.

Once implemented, SEL efforts are most likely to become a regular part of school schedules and routines to the extent to which they are aligned with local and national educational goals, comply with legal standards and mandates, and have the informed support of educational administration, organized groups of educators, and members of the community or government with responsibility to oversee high-quality education. Of particular importance is the connection between academic learning and SEL. SEL is not a separate subject area; rather, it must be linked to language literacy, instruction in math and science, history and current culture, health and physical education, and the performing arts. In all of these areas, the essential skills for academic learning and SEL mentioned earlier allow for deeper understanding of the content and improved pedagogy, with greater student engagement in learning and fewer behavior disruptions (CASEL, 2003; Elias et al., 1997; Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002; Utne O'Brien, Weissberg, & Shriver, 2003).

## PREPARE AND SUPPORT STAFF WELL

SEL is relatively new to many educators. Therefore, they need to be patient with themselves and allow themselves opportunity to learn this new area. Effective academic and social-emotional instruction benefits from well-planned professional development for school personnel; especially helpful is a system of support during the initial period of implementation. The kinds of professional development activities that are beneficial include training staff in children's social-emotional development, modeling and practice of constructivist and project-based teaching methods, multimodal instruction, coaching, and mutual feedback from colleagues. Staff also should become familiar with best practices in the field so that teachers can draw on what works most effectively. (Web sites that delineate best practices internationally can be found in Table 1.2.) CASEL is playing a significant role in identifying the best of what works. Its 2003 guide, *Safe and Sound*, is available on the Internet ([www.CASEL.org](http://www.CASEL.org)) and provides guidelines and information to allow educators to

**Table 1.2** Web Listings for Social-Emotional Learning Programs With International Presence

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<a href="http://www.researchpress.com">www.researchpress.com</a> —I Can Problem Solve
<a href="http://www.quest.edu">www.quest.edu</a> —Skills for Adolescence, Skills for Action, Violence Prevention
<a href="http://www.channing-bete.com">www.channing-bete.com</a> —Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies
<a href="http://www.esrnational.org">www.esrnational.org</a> —Resolving Conflict Creatively Program
<a href="http://www.responsiveclassroom.org">www.responsiveclassroom.org</a> —Responsive Classroom
<a href="http://www.cfchildren.org">www.cfchildren.org</a> —Second Step
<a href="http://www.peaceeducation.com">www.peaceeducation.com</a> —Peace Works
<a href="http://www.open-circle.org">www.open-circle.org</a> —Open Circle/Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program
<a href="http://www.umdnj.edu/spsweb">www.umdnj.edu/spsweb</a> ; <a href="http://www.eqparenting.com">http://www.eqparenting.com</a> —Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving Program
<a href="http://www.tribes.com">www.tribes.com</a> —Tribes TLC: A New Way of Learning and Being Together

### Resources for Service Learning/Citizenship Education

International Partnership for Service-Learning

[www.ipsl.org](http://www.ipsl.org)

National Center for Learning and Citizenship

[www.ecs.org/clc](http://www.ecs.org/clc)

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement

[www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

National Service-Learning Exchange

[www.nslexchange.org](http://www.nslexchange.org)

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse

[www.service-learning.org](http://www.service-learning.org)

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find programs and procedures that work best for their particular situations. Finally, most schools that sustain SEL efforts for long periods of time have committees that are responsible for supporting implementation, especially during the initial years (CASEL, 2003; Kessler, 2000; Lantieri, 2001; Leiberman, 1995).

### EVALUATE WHAT YOU DO

Although educators cannot guarantee the outcomes of all their efforts, they do have an ethical responsibility to monitor what they do and to attempt to continuously improve it. Therefore, educators need ways to keep track of student learning and performance in all areas, including the development of social-emotional abilities. SEL efforts should be monitored regularly, using multiple indicators to ensure programs are carried out as planned. Some of the best ways to gather the relevant information are to

- use checklists to keep track of whether SEL activities that are planned actually take place;
- provide teachers with the opportunity to rate or comment on the lessons they carry out, to note what went well and what might be improved in the future;
- use brief surveys of students to find out what they liked most and least about SEL activities, times they have put the skills to use, and ideas for improving instruction;
- ask people who work in the school (and parents, if possible) how they will know when students' academic and social-emotional skills are improving, and design indicators to measure the extent to which this takes place;
- place on the report card or other feedback system a listing of SEL skills or related indicators so that there can be accountability for this aspect of schooling and methods designed to improve instruction as needed (Elias et al., 1997; Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2003; Weissberg & Gullotta, 1997).

### CONCLUSION

Education is changing. Academic learning and SEL are becoming the new standard for what are considered the basics that children should acquire during their schooling. Because this is so new to many educators, but not to all, this chapter outlines ideas to help get social-emotional efforts started as well as to sustain those that have already begun. It is designed to help all schools become places in which learning is valued, dreams are born, leaders are made, and the talents of students—the greatest resource shared by every community—are unleashed.

Our students are important not only to their schools and families, but also to their communities, to their future workplaces and families, and to the world around them. Each student has potential. Although that potential is not identical for all, every student deserves the opportunity to have his or her potential developed. The combination of academic learning and SEL is the most promising way to accomplish this goal. We need teachers to lead the way toward preparing students for the tests of life, for the responsibilities of citizenship, and for adopting a lifestyle that is literate, responsible, nonviolent, drug free, and caring.

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