

Why Not Social and Emotional Learning?

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become an avant-garde term in the last few years. It is how people acquire and apply knowledge, attitudes and skills to understand and control emotions. Incorporating the SEL perspective, teachers can not only help students set and achieve positive goals, but also help students understand how empathizing with others will allow them to establish and maintain positive relationships as well as aid them in making responsible decisions. SEL also touches a number of fields with which it is related: emotional intelligence, mindfulness and the recently developed concept of Mediation which was detailed in the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In this paper, two researchers from different countries (the USA and Spain) review the literature on SEL, give a bird's eye view of the SEL situation in their countries, discuss its value in the classroom and make recommendations for further study.

Keywords: curriculum instruction, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, mediation

1. Introduction

January 2020, started a year of manifold uncertainties, namely the COVID-19 pandemic which locked down many areas in the world, threatened if not destroyed people's livelihoods, questioned the benefits of globalization, brought world travel to a halt, and in the world of education not only turned to a wide scale digitalization, thus, perturbing teachers and students alike, but also disrupted classroom dynamics. In this context, social and emotional learning (SEL) has found a fertile field for implementation and development. SEL implementation is essential in aiding academic success, and personal and social well-being of students in the 21st century.

2. SEL in the USA

The current times of Covid-19 and being amidst the World Pandemic of 2020-2021, has brought SEL to the forefront of education and the classroom. Teachers and students are facing new challenges with both distance learning and SEL. The dynamics of the modern-day classroom and instruction has forever changed and requires a new approach to curriculum and instruction. Students in all grade levels experience some degree of social-emotional interference during their schooling journey, but the current COVID-19 situation has affected their resilience. This social-emotional interference may present itself in the form of low self-esteem and fear which negatively impact students' ability to learn, thus evolving into persistent, lifelong, struggles with literacy (as cited in Dresser, 2012); therefore, indicating that SEL in the current times is an vital addition to both the curriculum and instruction.

Considering the importance of SEL in curriculum and instruction, the question then presents itself of how SEL could be incorporated into the curriculum and in turn embed itself into daily classroom instruction. SEL is defined as the process through which individuals develop the necessary skills, attitudes, and values to acquire social-emotional competence (as cited in Dresser, 2013). Through these necessary skills, students are able to achieve academic success and emotional stability. The inference can then be made that academic success is directly connected to the social well-being of a student and their academic success.

Another question that presents itself is how school districts in the United States ensuring SEL is included in curriculum and instruction. From the researchers' experience, SEL is usually incorporated into the Reading Language Arts (RELA) curriculum. But, due to the COVID-19 circumstances, SEL has also taken a more prevalent role in other content areas such as Math, Science, and Social Studies. For instance, daily check-ins with

students have become more frequent than before to make sure students are not just performing well academically, but socially and emotionally as well, thus, SEL activities are no longer just embedded into RELA content, but have become a daily implementation into the school day.

3. SEL in Spain

SEL has seen an upsurge in recent years in Spain. In 2015, the late Eduard Punset (2011) claimed that three great mistakes shaped the education children were receiving at that moment. The first one was ignoring two of the most important teachings of neuroscience, i.e., that intellect is useless without emotions, and that the brain is a very sophisticated organ which is difficult to understand due to its plasticity. The second error of the educational system was not accepting that teachers had to deal not only with the cultural diversity that exists in the classroom, but also, with what all students have in common: their emotions. He went on to affirm that the third big mistake of schools was the hierarchization of subjects that we had inherited from the past which placed emotions, and creative and artistic subjects behind mathematics, language and the humanities. To end, he declared that these errors could be solved by introducing social and emotional learning in the classroom. Considering that these affirmations were made in 2011 and that ten years later social and emotional learning is only scratching the surface of the Spanish curriculum proves that there is still much work to be done in incorporating SEL practices into the Spanish curriculum as a daily activity as is solving a mathematical puzzle or reading a literary text.

Teachers and parents have become increasingly interested in social and emotional learning and how it can help students monitor their behavior as well as increase their academic achievement. Interest in the field has sparked research especially in the last decade. Most of the research which relates social and emotional learning to academic performance is based on carrying out standardized tests and comparing the results with academic performance.

The study carried out by Pulido Acosta (2015) found a direct proportional relationship between emotional intelligence and performance. It showed that there is an interaction between fear and overall performance which verified how fear can affect the academic performance of an individual likewise their interaction with other people. Acosta concluded that considering and enhancing emotional competencies seems a necessary measure to improve the development of individuals particularly amongst youths.

The study carried out by Ros-Morente et al. (2017) reached similar conclusions when they found that both emotional competencies and self-esteem are closely related to academic performance. They found that those students with a better score in emotional competencies and self-esteem or who had alternatively received training in both showed better management of their emotions, thus improving how they handled stress and anxiety arising from the learning process, which could explain their better performance. In this sense, they highlighted that those students who perceived a greater degree of support from their teachers and peers, as well as education and training in their emotional management, were more likely to present higher academic performance and a more positive emotional state.

Cifuentes Sánchez's doctoral thesis (2017) focused on the learning environment and analyzed the relationship between emotional intelligence and mathematical performance. The students who participated in an intervention program on social-emotional development demonstrated greater skills in emotional intelligence and higher mathematical performance, in relation to the control group.

The results of the research in Spain are similar to those of the studies in the international sphere, highlighting emotional self-efficacy as one of the competency dimensions most related to the improvement of academic performance. It is also noteworthy to point out that in recent years: a) numerous private schools (Rodríguez-Pina, 2018) and public schools (Educación 3.0, 2019) have incorporated some form of SEL into their curriculum; b) teacher training centers such as the training center in Antequera, Málaga, and across the country include training courses in SEL, and, c) there are universities offering a new methodology which will incorporate SEL into the classroom such as the universities in Andalusia, Cataluña or Aragón (Zamorano, 2020).

4. SEL and Learning Barriers

As mentioned above in section one on SEL in the United States, SEL in the context of daily classroom instruction consists of daily check ins with students, (even if only with a simple greeting enquiring about their emotional state upon arrival to the class or an enquiry regarding the previous evening), embedded SEL content in the Reading English Language Arts, and a general awareness of the social well-being of students in their virtual/classroom environment. According to a study conducted by Babalis et al. (2013), SEL has a definite effect upon the emotional competence and academic achievement of primary school students. Another study conducted by Cook (2014), indicated that school culture and practices create barriers to the academic achievement of students which would suggest that without the implementation of SEL institutional practices and curriculum supported content, students

would experience low academic achievement as their social-emotional needs are not supported in their learning environment. According to this study, the lack of SEL supported environments and content, has had a greater effect upon English Language Learners in schools. In addition to SEL impacting the academic achievement of these learners, other factor such as: acculturation challenges, experiencing racism and discrimination, and poverty (as cited in Benner & Graham, 2011) add to the detriment of learners' academic achievement.

If English Language Learners are affected by SEL, this would lead to the implication that all students are affected by SEL and that its presence being embedded into instruction and curriculum should be required because students of this millennium have encountered more emotional tragedies within the recent years than those of former millennia namely due to school shootings, cyber bullying, and currently, the Covid-19 destabilizing situation. These upsetting circumstances are no doubt having an impact on student academic success and performance (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

5. SEL and Empowering the Learning Experience

The research cited in the sections above has shown that there are indicators that suggest a correlation between academic achievement and SEL. To develop a positive learning experience that encompasses SEL, curriculum and instruction would need to include the five social and emotional competencies which make up SEL as proposed by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): (1) Self-Awareness, (2) Social Awareness, (3) Self-Management, (4) Relationship Skills, and (5) Responsible Decision-Making and a positive teacher presence to make SEL an empowering learning experience. SEL programs that involve teachers presenting activities from a curriculum that explicitly teaches children social-emotional competencies that allow for the development of critical thinking, self-talk, and additional cognitive skills will empower the learning experience in the classroom (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011).

Building an empowering learning experience with the use of the SEL competencies, would definitely involve the early implementation of the five competencies. According to Livaccari (2013), a rigorous educational program is important to promote self-esteem and academic achievement as early as the stage of language development in primary educational years; meaning pre-K educational programs would definitely need to encompass the five competencies of SEL in order to provide an empowering educational experience that would continue throughout the educational experience of a child. Empowering the learning experience of a child through the usage of the five competencies of SEL will in turn strengthen the emotional intelligence of the student.

6. SEL and Emotional Intelligence

SEL and Emotional Intelligence (EI) have long been partnered as intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that are essential for the building a student's self-esteem (Basu & Merillod, 2011). Emotional Intelligence measures an individual's ability to interact through the measures of personal and social competencies. Both EI and SEL appraisal measures quantify the following competencies: Self-awareness, Self-management, Social awareness, and Relationship-management. Neuroscience has always embarked upon the science of EI, academic achievement, and personal well-being (Basu & Merillod, 2011) which is why it definitely makes sense to consider both EI and SEL in the development of curriculum and instruction.

Students today are inheriting not only the world's problems, but a new view of how education is shifting from brick and mortar into a virtual online way of learning. Students of this millennium are expected to have the skills and the will to solve problems that do not even exist yet. In order to do so, students of this millennium would need the skills and mindset that immerses in both EI and SEL (Lantieri, 2009). EI and SEL both provide the platform in which students can grow in a healthy socially, emotionally, and academically positive environment which provides the tools the students need to cope with adversity, enhances their critical thinking skills and provides the fundamentals of positive problem resolution to aid them not just during their academic life, but also through adulthood.

7. SEL and Mindfulness

The American Psychological Association defined mindfulness as "a moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment (Davis and Hayes, 2012)." In this sense, mindfulness in education is directly related to SEL as its goals include self-awareness, empathy, techniques to calm and focus the mind, maintaining mindful communication, and meditation - even though it has long been associated with mindfulness it is not equivalent to mindfulness, rather just another coping mechanism (Seema and Säare, 2019). Developing a sense of self and belonging is complicated in our current fast-paced ever-changing public world, thus making a response that addresses overall health and sustainability of learning environments that support the well-being of both students and educators a priority. Problems such as anxiety, distraction, competition or isolation increase the demands on

the learning environment where adjustment strategies which will increase the ability to focus attention, regulate difficult emotions, build inner resilience and work towards supportive relationships are needed more than ever.

Stating the obvious, students and educators are faced with numerous external factors which influence the classroom. Such factors include the COVID-19 pandemic, attachment to digital technologies, adherence to social media, blended families, household peace or lack thereof, added to learner capabilities per se, threaten the classroom as a peaceful effective learning environment. In this regard, tasks and activities that encourage and favor mindfulness can ease the threats that hover over today's classrooms. Ackerman (2020) includes a compendium of resources and activities to implement mindfulness in the learning environment. Some basic practices to initiate the incorporation of mindful tasks alongside SEL practices include:

- Where possible establish a ritual to highlight positive moments such as dim the lights, use a soft bell, include background music or air soothing scents.
- Minimize the idea of failure: if students do not pass a test, do not focus on the fail, but on ways of attaining the knowledge or skill that is missing.
- Identify and name feelings: if there is an issue in the classroom, identify it, label it and discuss ways of getting over it.
- Focus on your five senses at a particular moment: What can you see? What can you touch? What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you taste?
- Reset the situation during a tense moment at school. Use the STOP procedure. Take a moment to:
 - **Stop:** Pause whatever it is you are doing.
 - **Take a breath:** Notice the air moving in and out of your lungs. Take a few breaths that will allow you to re-focus.
 - **Observe:** Name and take a mental note of how you are feeling.
 - **Proceed:** Begin again from where you left off.

Lantieri & Zakrzewski (2015) discuss the case of a male student who had been taught SEL skills through the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), yet lost control of himself when he heard balloons pop causing him to shove the boy who was popping the balloons violently up against the wall. When asked about why he had done that, he explained that when he was younger, he had had a gun shoved in his mouth which fortunately had had no bullets, so he was taken back to that situation when he heard the balloons pop, reminding him of the gun. The unfortunate young man would no longer hold the position of mediator he had held before the incident, nor would he be allowed to continue the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. Lantieri & Zakrzewski (2015) concluded that even though this student knew how to mediate conflicts, his amygdala had taken over so forcefully that he could not manage to access the SEL skills when he really needed them. They believe that if this student's training had included mindfulness, he would have been more likely to notice that something was going on in his body when he heard the balloons pop. With this awareness, he might have chosen to regulate his emotions through deep breathing or some other technique and then use the skills he had learned through the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. Perhaps the STOP procedure could have been useful.

8. SEL and Mediation

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and Assessment (CEFR) was published in 2001; however, the concept of mediation greatly remained unnoticed until the CEFR was updated in 2018 with the development of the Companion Volume (CV). The CV (2018) has not only updated and created descriptors for mediation, but it has also modernized other aspects of the CEFR (2001) by revisiting and/or including online communication, sign language and plurilingual/pluricultural competence amongst others. Nevertheless, it is the development of the descriptors of mediation which are the center of attention as mediation has become a focal point of interest "with the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of our societies" (CV, 2018, p 22).

What is mediation and why will it be useful for our students in a SEL learning environment? In simpler terms, mediation is using our language skills to transfer information from a source to a person who needs to understand it but cannot do so. For instance, imagine you are in a training course with teachers from other countries. You have to work on a project with colleagues who do not know a language (or material) you are proficient in, but you have found a source which would be great for your subsequent presentation, so you translate the information from said language into English, thus, making the content accessible to all. That transferal of information is not done only through translation, the mediator also needs to use summarizing, note-taking, paraphrasing, identifying main ideas, in other words synthesizing a message that he or she will make "digestible" for another person or persons.

Mediation works three ways, there is a source, a manipulation and a transfer. This is what makes it such a useful skill for our students and ELL students in particular.

Mediation types can be textual, conceptual or communicative, while mediation strategies are the ways in which a particular subarea of meaning and function is structured and expressed in order to enlighten a person who does not understand.

In mediation, the learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes across modalities (e.g. from spoken to signed or vice versa, in cross-modal communication) and sometimes from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation). The role of language is the centre of attention in processes like creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning, encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and passing on new information in an appropriate form. The context can be social, pedagogic, cultural, linguistic or professional (CV, 2020, p. 90).

These characteristics alone would satisfy the relationship between SEL and mediation as we are envisioning a pluricultural classroom or a classroom with mixed abilities. The crux of the matter is that students are collaborating with each other or using a common source to share knowledge that is otherwise “invisible” to some.

Using SEL strategies such as check-ins, partnership or group tasks, role-plays, community building games, talk times, and so on through mediation activities in which students must resolve a conflict or tackle problems will no doubt not only have students reflecting on real-life situations which are within their contexts, but also help them to deal with their own circumstances.

9. How to Implement SEL in the Classroom?

What would educators have to know, in order to implement SEL successfully in the current virtual and hybrid educational environment? This question has surfaced recently, with the present-day changing educational scene. Covid-19 has definitely modified how education is delivered around the world. In general, most educational institutions are delivering instruction either solely online or using a hybrid model. SEL has generally been implemented in the Reading English Language Arts (RELA) curriculum. However, given the current times of Covid-19, SEL is now acquiring a new protagonism which includes the need for daily instruction, not only curriculum-embedded which means more SEL activities are required to ensure the academic success of students given this pandemic.

Teachers are the most influential factor in the academic success of their students, (as cited in Dresser, 2013), this means that in the context of instruction teachers are delivering at the moment they hold the responsibility for ensuring the academic success of their students through the ability to guarantee the implementation of SEL activities. Most teachers acknowledge that SEL is important and recognize the role that schools have in developing these competencies in students; however, teachers have reported a lack of confidence in knowing what and how to teach SEL competencies (Main, 2018). This would suggest that teacher education programs would need to make sure their future educators are able to instruct their students in the competencies of both SEL and EI. Needless to say, this may be the prospect, but what can teachers do in the here and now of the growing need to instill the SEL competencies in the online and hybrid classroom instruction? The following suggestions can be implemented by educators in daily instruction within the context of the five SEL competencies:

- *Self-Awareness*: A daily self-check in with students, ask how they may be feeling or doing this particular morning fosters building teacher/student relationships.
- *Self-Management*: Providing engaging learning activities which allows students to be involved in their learning journey and promotes learner autonomy.
- *Social Awareness*: Providing moments for students to self-reflect upon their learning, environment, and strengths and weaknesses.
- *Relationship Skills*: Allow students to build relationships not only with their teacher, but with their peers through the method of collaborative learning activities and projects.
- *Responsible Decision -Making*: Provide students with daily autonomy through instructional content, reflection, and peer mediation, in order to define and refine their responsible decision-making skills.

By providing students the ability to practice the five competencies of SEL, teachers are in turn aiding the academic achievement of their students.

10. Why SEL?

From what the researchers have described in the sections above, the answer should be because it will not only reduce conflict, raise self-awareness and self-appraisal, but also increase academic achievement as SEL allows students the opportunity to know and manage themselves; it allows them to understand the views of others and relate effectively; it also helps them to make sound decisions about personal and social decisions (Durlak, 2010).

Nonetheless, more research in diverse contexts (different countries with specific needs) is desirable in order to establish SEL as a model to support its value in the improvement of academic achievement and relationships within varied learning environments.

11. Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to shed importance upon SEL and its impact on the current learning environments amongst Covid-19. It would be considered an understatement, if SEL is not recognized as a significant foundation of instruction and curriculum given the current shift in the way students are educated around the world during the current pandemic. More research would be needed to measure the need for increased SEL instruction during this shift in paradigm of global K-12 instruction. First of all, SEL needs more widespread dissemination of the concept and methodology. Secondly, SEL needs to offer more reports on effective specific contexts in which it has made a difference in behavior and academic achievement. Finally, SEL needs a set of defined tools which can be applicable in any country and context for it to be effective and validated. In conclusion, SEL implementation is a noteworthy option to be considered when striving for academic success, personal and social well-being in particular in the K-12 setting, but also in adult education which is a field yet to be studied.

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