Principles and Practices for Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning in Daily Instruction

Exploring Pedagogical Stance, Teaching Structures, and Classroom Practices for Effective Integration of SEL

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An extensive body of research demonstrates what many educators have long known: building a safe and caring school community and attending to social and emotional learning (SEL) are essential to students' overall success. Children learn best in communities where their basic psychological needs are met (Connell, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 1985). These include the needs for autonomy, belonging, and physical and emotional safety. Children also need to feel competent and successful in making sense of what they are learning. When such basic needs are met, students feel safe to express themselves and take the risks required for learning. Conversely, children who experience chronic fear and anxiety are less likely to learn effectively and often have difficulty concentrating and performing up to their potential (Jensen, 2005; Siegel & Bryson, 2011).

ABOUT COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM

Our mission as a nonprofit is to help students grow as readers, writers, and thinkers while they develop the social and emotional skills necessary to thrive. Founded in 1980, Center for the Collaborative Classroom conducted seminal research on social development. Collaborative Classroom has evolved into a partner for schools and districts that is dedicated to transforming the school experience, developing students, and empowering teachers as they engage students.

Given these realities, it is not surprising that children in caring school environments where SEL is part of instruction tend to do better academically. A meta-analysis of 213 randomized-controlled studies of SEL programs found that students who experienced such teaching and learning demonstrated significantly higher academic achievement, as well as improved social and emotional skills, more positive classroom behavior, fewer problem behaviors such as violence, bullying, delinquency, and drug use, and reduced emotional problems such as depression or stress disorders (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012).

Educators can feel confident that including SEL in their daily instruction does not mean selling children short academically. Attending to students' social and emotional learning has been shown to result in gains in grades and standardized test scores (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004; Merrell and Gueldner, 2010). In Collaborative Classroom's six-district study of the Child Development Project, we found that developing students' "sense of community" in school or "connectedness" to school was vital to students' learning and development in general. It accounted for a whole host of positive prosocial outcomes as well as increased academic achievement (Solomon et al., 2000).

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In a follow-up study, Collaborative Classroom tracked these same students into middle school and found that there is a long-term impact in doing this work. In middle school, those same students had higher grades and test scores, experienced a greater sense of community in school, had higher educational aspirations, and manifested less misconduct and delinquency than peers in the control group (Battistich et al., 2004).

Developing students' social and emotional skills is clearly beneficial to their academic and social growth. The challenge for practitioners is bringing this idea to life in the classroom. In order to truly develop students socially as well as academically, the SEL instruction must be a sequenced, structured, and explicit part of the curriculum (Durlak et al., 2011). It cannot be pushed to the margins of the school day. It must be part of the very fabric of classroom instruction, planned with intention into each school day (Brunn, 2010).

While the supporting research is clear, the challenge for educators lies in how to implement social and emotional learning in the classroom. Implementation can prove tricky for schools. Our district partners have found, for example, that the best outcomes are unlikely to be result if SEL takes the form of a stand-alone, 25-minute lesson that is divorced from the rest of the school day. Nor is implementation of SEL effective when it is separated from the central work of academic instruction or spread lightly on top of instruction, like frosting on a cake. Social and emotional learning must be "baked in"—integrated meaningfully into established routines and norms, in the ongoing work of classroom community- and relationship-building, and in the lesson structures and teaching stances that educators use every day.

So, what does comprehensive, effective implementation of social and emotional learning look like in actual classroom practice? What pedagogical stances, principles, and structures best support educators as they work to bring SEL to their students? In this paper we explore these questions, with the goal of providing both research-based guidance and concrete examples of effective teaching structures and classroom practices.

Observations from an Effective Implementation

How does effective implementation of social and emotional learning impact classroom instruction and student learning? What does that implementation look like in an actual classroom? Consider this experience from a recent observation day co-organized by a New Jersey school district and Center for the Collaborative Classroom in several of the district's elementary schools. These schools primarily serve students of color and English Language Learners, with most students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The visitors originally planned to observe a writing lesson and focus on English Language Learners, particularly students who were struggling. When they reached the classrooms, however, they were surprised by how difficult it was to quickly identify the subgroup of students they intended to focus on.

Instead, the visitors saw all students collaborating. Pairs and groups of students were observed generating ideas and giving feedback on each other's pieces of writing. The visitors watched students expressing different opinions as to what they thought a passage in a shared text meant and reflecting together on their partner work. What surprised the visitors was the way the instruction engaged the students, included every student's voice, and provided space for each student to access the lesson content, no matter their learning level. The most impressive thing they noticed was the climate and tone as the students worked together in caring and respectful ways. Students took risks linguistically, academically, and socially.

Key Principles that Inform the Pedagogy

For the interactions observed in the New Jersey classrooms to take place, the teachers must have understood that to help their students achieve at high levels, the students first needed a safe and supportive, judgment-free classroom where they could be vulnerable enough to expose what they did not yet know. The teachers also must have recognized that the students needed core social and emotional skills to help them navigate school and thrive.

As these teachers demonstrated, doing the hard work of integrating academic and social development has tremendous benefits for students. The pedagogy that drove their lessons is informed by four key principles (Brunn, 2014):

• Create an inclusive, caring, and safe learning community

• Integrate social and emotional learning into daily academic instruction

• Build intrinsic motivation

• Craft lessons and learning situations centered on student thinking

THE FOUNDATION OF AN EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION: AN INCLUSIVE, CARING, AND SAFE LEARNING COMMUNITY

When children step into a classroom, they carry with them all kinds of thoughts and experiences. As they settle into their desks, they might be consumed by an argument or conflict they had with a classmate in the schoolyard, or they might be sad because no one sat with them at lunch. They might be worried about the next period because they are reading at a significantly lower level than the rest of their classmates or feel like they can't express themselves clearly.

It is irresponsible to think that the thoughts and emotions that students carry into the classroom don't affect learning. As educators we must understand that the social worlds our students inhabit greatly influence their work in the classroom. As Joseph Zins and colleagues wrote, "Intrinsically, schools are social places and learning is a social process. Students do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the support of their families. Emotions can facilitate or hamper their learning and their ultimate success in school" (Zins et al., 2004, p. 3). We know that given a safe, supportive, and inclusive classroom and school community, children will develop intellectually, emotionally, socially, and ethically (Schaps, 2005; Watson & Ecken, 2003).

Therefore, establishing a safe and supportive classroom community is foundational to an effective implementation, but it is not a simple task. A truly robust classroom community has a high bar to clear: if students are reading books that are at a significantly lower level than their classmates, they need to know they won't get laughed at or teased; in writing, if they share a draft that contains still-forming ideas, or details of their personal lives, they need to know their work will be respected. In order for students to grow, they need an environment in which it is safe to make mistakes—mistakes that are essential to their eventual development (Duckworth, 1987).

Structures that Build and Sustain Classroom Community

Establishing a caring community takes time and intentionality. Teachers will need to invest significant time during the first four to six weeks of school to establish their classroom learning community. During these early lessons, students work with a wide variety of partners. They discuss what it means to be a good partner. They discuss how to agree and disagree respectfully. At the conclusion of each lesson, the teacher uses questions such as, "How did we work today in a caring or respectful way?" to solidify learning. A follow-up question might be, "What do you want to keep working on?"

Teachers also lead class meetings where students talk about what they like to read and what genres and topics they like to write about. Conversely, they also discuss what they don't like and what they find challenging. The idea is to form a community around the work the class will be doing together. These class meetings are places where students set norms for how they want to treat one another. Later in the year, teachers use class

meetings to check in on norms, solve problems, and plan for specific events. These meetings give students a voice in the classroom, help them constructively solve problems, and teach important social skills necessary for thoughtful and productive interaction around challenging academic and social issues.

The following structures are vital for developing a caring, safe, and inclusive classroom community (Brunn, 2010; Schaps, 2005):

- Building relationships through class discussions and team-building activities
- Setting norms for how students want to treat one another
- Using class meetings to help students solve problems, plan events, and make class decisions
- Provide students with many opportunities to work with different classmates

Taking the time to focus specifically on forming and strengthening relationships, especially (but not only) at the beginning of the year, is critical to establishing the context where students can take risks with their thinking, share ideas, and grow as learners and as people.

INTEGRATING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INTO DAILY ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

When implemented well, weaving together academic, social, and emotional learning in, for example, a whole-class reading comprehension lesson can look effortless and natural to a casual observer. And from a student's perspective, the academic content and social skills being taught together feel intuitively right and useful because they are, in fact, essential for that student's success in the lesson (NCSEAD, 2018). However, the apparent simplicity of integrating SEL and academics masks the hard work, planning, and practice it takes to make something difficult and complex look easy.

Effective Lesson Structures for Integrating Academics and SEL

Having a predictable lesson structure is essential to good instruction (Brunn, 2010). The lesson's structure functions like hangers in a closet. As hangers hold and organize clothes, preventing a crumpled heap on the floor, so does a lesson's structure organize the content in a coherent and clear way.

The following simple, four-part lesson structure supports the interdependence of social, emotional, and academic learning. The structure keeps the curriculum organized and ensures that what we value in our teaching and learning is not inadvertently squeezed out of lessons. Here are the four parts of a lesson that support the integration of academic and social development:

- **Preparation for work:** The teacher introduces the goals and objectives, and connects the content of the lesson to a prior lesson or experience. Next the teacher provides any necessary background knowledge. Finally she prepares the students to work together by introducing or reinforcing a social skill or discussing problems that have come up in prior lessons.
- **Whole-class instruction:** The teacher introduces the lesson's content and facilitates student thinking and interaction. Students begin to investigate the material as a group or with partners. In a writing lesson, for example, students might examine how three different authors begin an argumentative essay. The teacher might have the students work in pairs to examine the different opening sentences and discuss which ones they found most powerful and why.
- **Individual and small-group work**: Students are trying some of the strategies taught during the whole-class lesson. They may do this by reading or writing alone. At other times they may be working in small groups or with a partner.

- **Lesson reflection:** The teacher asks the students to reflect on how they worked together during the lesson. They might discuss how the use of a certain social skill went or they might discuss a challenge they encountered working in a group or with a partner. The teacher notes the information from this reflection so that it can be brought forward to the next day's lesson.

Consistently organizing daily lessons using the four-part structure above ensures that there is space and time in each lesson dedicated to both academic and social learning. The structure provides a predictable, overarching framework for instruction and guarantees that essential elements are always included in daily instruction.

Daily Instructional Opportunities for Collaboration: Using Cooperative Structures

In every lesson, teachers can look for authentic opportunities for students to work together. This is accomplished through the use of cooperative structures. These structures present opportunities for students to think and work together, the essential tools for building classroom community and engaging students. They are also the vehicle used to teach students the social skills they need to grow as successful collaborators. As Peter Johnston writes, "We conveniently forget that children's ability to use language as a tool for thinking on their own has its origins in thinking together. We also forget that most problems of any significance require the application of more than one mind. The question is, can children learn to use, say, three minds together to accomplish things that the three minds separately could not?" (Johnston, 2012, p. 94). This insight is at the heart of authentic collaboration.

Here are examples of cooperative structures that support student thinking:

- **Turn to Your Partner:** The teacher pauses and students quickly turn to their partners to discuss what they are thinking or wondering.
- **Think, Pair, Share:** Students first get a moment to think about a question or idea presented. Then they turn and talk with a partner.
- **Think, Pair, Write:** This is similar to Think, Pair, Share but includes time to write after students get to talk.
- **Heads Together**: In this structure two different pairs turn their heads together to make a group of four.

Using cooperative structures makes students accountable for their learning and behavior. When a teacher is in the midst of teaching a whole-class lesson and asks the students to "Turn to Your Partner," everyone is empowered to participate and is responsible for doing so. These structures allow for maximum engagement with the content at hand because the students are active, and the situation is real.

As every educator knows, inevitably children involved in partnerships will struggle. One student may not talk, another may talk too much, or they may vehemently disagree about a particular idea. These struggles present valuable opportunities to teach students the skills necessary to successfully navigate these challenges. For example, working in partnerships provides students with regular opportunities to develop and practice the following skills:

- Taking turns speaking and listening
- Explaining thinking clearly
- Giving full attention to the speaker
- Sharing a partner's thinking with the class
- Agreeing and disagreeing respectfully using prompts such as "I agree with_____ because . . .," "I disagree with _____ because . . .," and "In addition to what _____ said, I think that . . ."

- Reaching agreement
- Taking responsibility for their own behavior
- Giving and receiving feedback

THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

With the foundation of a caring, safe classroom community and the use of lesson-based and cooperative partner-work structures for integrating social, emotional, and academic learning into daily instruction, the goal of an effective implementation seems within reach. However, it is imperative that educators also recognize and attend to the importance of students' intrinsic motivation.

When students' basic needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence are met, their level of engagement increases and they become intrinsically motivated to engage in the work of school (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 1991; Schaps et al., 2004). Classrooms that provide students with real choices build powerful relationships and provide students with opportunities to be successful and grow are classrooms that have motivated students. Examples of ways to intentionally builds students' intrinsic motivation include having students:

- Choose the topics they want to write about
- Select books and genres that they want to read
- Choose areas of research or study that interest them
- Write for real audiences
- Build relationships through teambuilders, partner work, and class meetings
- Set learning goals with high and achievable expectations

By providing a variety of opportunities for students to build relationships and to experience autonomy while still covering the content necessary for the grade level, these structures bolster students' motivation to participate in school activities and to be fully engaged members of the community. This is important because, in the end, the students control how much they talk, how many books they read, and how many pages they write. As educators we can try to force them do it, but unless they are motivated to do the work, books are left unread and pages unwritten.

CRAFTING LESSONS AND LEARNING SITUATIONS CENTERED ON STUDENT THINKING

The final element in integrating academic and social development is structuring the learning situation so that student thinking is the heart of the lesson. Students need situations in which they can use the social skills they are learning. They need opportunities to struggle and to challenge each other's ideas. As Eleanor Duckworth says, "they need time for their confusion" (Duckworth, 1987). This can only happen if the learning situation supports students in engaging in the work. If students passively sit and take notes while the teacher explains the content, there is little room for active engagement. If, however, the learning situation is structured so that student thinking is the goal (beyond simply delivering the content), then the opportunity emerges for students to be active and engaged learners (Deci et al., 1991). In lessons where students are active, teachers ask open-ended questions and challenge students with tasks where there is no clear right answer. By the very nature of their open-endedness, these situations provide the context for social and academic learning to thrive.

For example, consider the following scenario.

A teacher who wants to have students learn and explore how to make inferences in their reading might start with reading a shared text aloud. He stops at key, predetermined places so he can have the students talk about what the text is making them think about. Then at the end of the reading, he might go back to a passage in the text that was particularly important, perhaps a place where the motives or true nature of a character are revealed. The teacher might ask, "What do you think is happening in this passage?" "Why do you think that?"

As students explore the passage and as different opinions emerge, the teacher might say, "Some of you now think that the character is evil. What in the text makes you think that?" After the students have shared what they think, along with what evidence supports their opinions, the teacher might ask, "Who disagrees?" and "What evidence suggests something different?"

At the conclusion of the lesson, when there is a consensus about what the evidence suggests, the teacher can then label the students' thinking by saying, "We decided that there were certain clues that led us to believe the character was evil, but the author does not come out and say that. You had to use clues from the text to make a decision about the true nature of the character. That is called making an inference."

In this example, students need to use the social skills they have learned to engage in the lesson. They need to take risks with their thinking. And finally, they need to reach consensus about what the text means. The students also had to use evidence to support their thinking, an academic skill. All these form a combination of social and academic skills use.

But none of this could have happened if the teacher had simply told the students what an inference is and then modeled it. Instead, by centering the lesson on the students' experience of inferential thinking, he was able to engage them in doing the work of uncovering what making an inference is. The students were doing the thinking, not the teacher. The teacher was facilitating and naming what they were doing by carefully selecting a text and pausing to ask questions at the right times to get the students to do the work. By prioritizing the students' thinking processes, the lesson allowed the academic content to be covered while the students were simultaneously learning how to interact with others in productive ways—seamlessly melding the academic and the social. The whole was greater than its parts.

Conclusion

Research has demonstrated that social and emotional learning is a crucial ingredient in students' development, but for implementation to be effective and impactful, SEL must be intentionally woven into the fabric of daily learning and classroom life. The success of implementation rests on key principles that underpin the pedagogy and teaching structures that we have explored here—namely, the foundational need for a inclusive, safe, and caring learning community; the systematic integration of SEL into daily academic instruction; the ongoing work of building and honoring students' intrinsic motivation; and the importance of placing student thinking at the heart of instruction. As educators it is essential that we possess the skills, strategies, and teaching practices that will develop students who are fully engaged with their learning and who see themselves as active, valued members of their school community.

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