



Social and Emotional Education: The Basis of Core Life

In the wake of the complex and ever-changing global and technological environment of the 21st century, our families, schools, and communities need to make careful, informed decisions regarding how to protect our children’s development for positive life choices. Currently, many of our young people are growing up without the supports they need to feel valued and to become productive members of society. Therefore, it is important for educational leaders to identify and implement effectively research-based and/or theory informed educational approaches that promote children’s social, emotional, and academic growth in the early years of school to ensure lifelong meaningful, successful, and fulfilled relationships and experiences.

*“Character education is just as important to education as reading, math, and science.
~Maria Montessori*

Today’s schools face daunting challenges as they attempt to educate students academically, not only for self-knowledge but also for meeting the accountability requirements of our data-driven educational system, while simultaneously developing the personal and social skills necessary to become successful, caring, and responsible members of society. According to Greenberg et al. (2003), the 21st century has generated “...a whole new set of changes for the youth,” including “increased economic and social pressures on families, weakening of community institutions that nurture children’s social, emotional, and moral development, and easier access by children to media that encourage health damaging behavior” (p. 468). Therefore, the challenge is to determine the best educational content and environment that will enhance learning during school years and ensure meaningful, happy, and successful futures for all our students.

Given this context, many researchers have developed “fragmented initiatives” in an attempt to develop educational approaches that address social and emotional skills, as well as academic skills. In 1994, the Fetzer Institute convened a group of school-based prevention researchers, educators, and child advocates to address the problem. As a result, the term social and emotional learning (SEL) was initiated and suggested as a conceptual framework. With the organization of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the goal of “establishing high-quality, evidence-based SEL as an essential part of preschool through high school became a reality “(Greenberg et al., 2003, p. 469).

A review of the research literature of the last two decades supports the assertion that schools must design programs that integrate personal, social, and academic skills. Research suggests that a high quality education should generate students who possess self –knowledge; develop “healthy interpersonal relationships”; are “culturally literate”; are “committed to lifelong learning“; are “intellectually reflective”; “interact in socially skilled and respectful ways”; demonstrate positive, safe, and healthy behaviors”; “contribute ethically and responsibly to their peer group, family, school, and community”; “adhere to five shared values: compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect”; and “possess basic

competencies, work habits, and values as a foundation for meaningful employment and engaged citizenship” (Diekstra, 2008; Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2002; Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg, Zins, and Elias, 2003; Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lantieri 2001; Learning First Alliance, 2001; Loges and Kidder, 1997; Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004.

Other significant research literature on educating the “whole” child emerged. For example, Lantieri (2001) provided a synthesis of the social and emotional learning movement brought about by Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). Lantieri believes that Goleman “paved the way in making educators make the link between one’s emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective use of one’s IQ—or our cognitive skills and knowledge” (p.17). Another theory developed by Howard Gardner (1999) advocated the existence of multiple intelligences and identified specific intelligences as: “personal intelligences,” “naturalist intelligence,” “a spiritual intelligence,” and “an existential intelligence.” Still another notable program addressing the coordination of social, emotional, moral, physical, and cognitive development of young people was “developmental assets” (Search Institute, 1997). Researchers from the Search Institute focused not only on risk factors but also on a strengths-based component. For example, the Search Institute researchers studied 100,000 12th graders in 213 towns and cities in the US to identify the “building blocks of healthy development: that assist young people in choosing positive paths, making wise decisions, and growing up to be caring and responsible adults.” As a result of their study, they identified forty positive experiences or qualities, called “developmental assets.” Among those are service to others, religious community, creative activities, caring, integrity, honesty, personal power, sense of purpose, and positive view of personal future.

Unfortunately, Lantieri (2001) concludes that as of the beginning of the 21st century, our present system of public education does not “consciously and systematically” deal with these critical issues (p. 11). Likewise, Greenberg et al. (2003) state that “the current impact of these programs is limited because of insufficient coordination with other components of school operations and inattention to implementation and evaluation factors necessary for strong program impact and sustainability” (p.466).

Greenberg et al. (2003) identify research supporting a myriad of school-based prevention programs that target positive academic, social, emotional, and health behaviors. (See the complete review to access the research studies.) Some of the studies are environment-focused; some person focused, and some include multiple approaches. The authors conclude “that well-designed, well-implemented school-based prevention and youth development programming can positively influence a diverse array of social, health, and academic outcomes.” Furthermore, they believe that key effective educational strategies include: teaching children to apply social and emotional skills in their daily lives through interactive classroom instruction and school or community service; fostering respectful, supportive relationships among students, school staff, and parents; and supporting and rewarding positive social, health, and academic behavior through systematic school–family–community approaches. Furthermore, they also found that multiyear, multicomponent programs are more likely to produce lasting benefits as compared to short-term interventions.

In 2004, Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman initiated discussion on the importance of developing character traits. They identified 25 core virtues that people across cultures accept: optimism, curiosity, perseverance, enthusiasm, social intelligence, self-control, gratitude, honesty, courage, bravery, kindness, appreciation of beauty, humor, and fairness. Ultimately, seven core strengths were identified as “real game changers for academic achievement, success, and happiness” (Tiffany Shlain & The Moxie Institute Films. *The Science of Character*. Sept. 18, 2015. www.letitripple.org/character).

Payton et al. (2008) and Durlak et al. (2011) published additional empirical evidence regarding the positive impact of SEL programs. Findings from the Durlak study revealed that SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that showed an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement. This finding is of utmost importance in view of schools’ accountability for improving students’ academic performance. The findings from these studies replicate results from other research teams, such as Wilson et al. (2001) and Diekstra (2008). Although research supports the effectiveness of SEL programming, further research is needed to enhance the quality of future programs. Moreover, the body of literature also indicates that systemic factors are crucial to success (Greenberg et al., 2003). Three significant factors are policy, leadership, and professional development for teachers and administrators (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003; Devaney et al., 2006).

Current researchers outline five key competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). And, *Edutopia in Social and Emotional Learning Research Review* (November 7, 2012) provides a chart of some of the most effective research-proven SEL programs available: Roots of Empathy, Positive Action, Responsive Classroom Approach, Second Step, 4 R’s (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution), Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, Meditation, and Service Learning. (See the original chart for the practices, outcomes, and research).

Educational approaches, however, must be presented in a school culture conducive to learning. Dr. Kent D. Peterson, a professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, defined school culture as: "School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school." Peterson and Deal stress the importance of collaboration and consensus by all members of the community. They state that a positive school culture is a place with “a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learning” (2002, p. 29). More currently, the *Glossary of Educational Reform* (11-25-2013) defined school culture thusly: “beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.” <http://edglossary.org/school-culture/>

Given the aforementioned literature and research on the importance of providing a coordinated approach to teaching academic, social, and emotional skills, of developing core virtues and/or character traits within our students, and of creating a positive school culture conducive to learning, in 2013 a group of educational professionals envisioned a conceptual framework that would address these criteria, specifically a framework with a “developmental assets” foundation. Subsequently, they named the framework “Core Life” and identified 18 critical character traits that they deemed essential to happy, healthy, and successful lives: respect, responsibility, rules, goals, volunteering, empathy, gratitude, tolerance, healthy living, moderation, honesty, wisdom, optimism, perseverance, courtesy, survival, mindfulness, and transformation (growth

mindset). Beautifully designed, educationally sound, and community-friendly “teaching aids” were developed for each character trait. The aids were not intended as a “curriculum” but rather as a process of implementation that would serve to enrich the climate and culture of schools and to build the character traits of students. As such, the Core Life developers sought to involve all members of the educational community in determining the appropriate implementation of the materials in an effort to produce a consistent, coordinated approach with the products. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the materials were used primarily with 3rd and 4th graders but have been expanded across K-6 grades since then.

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