

Jacqueline A. Norris

Looking at Classroom Management Through a Social and Emotional Learning Lens

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an approach that teaches self-regulation, self-monitoring, and social skills in school settings. SEL has been shown to be an effective method of reducing negative social interactions and increasing academic achievement. This article relates the experiences of one intermediate school principal and her staff as they used SEL strategies to change the climate and culture of their highly diverse school population. Classroom management is discussed as the vehicle used by the teachers, while the principal aligned school procedures with the philosophy of SEL. The article describes the lessons they learned and suggests directions for future research into how SEL can make effective and meaningful contributions to the field of education.

IMAGINE A CLASSROOM where students are greeted every day by their teacher and classmates, where there is a corner called the “Turtle Zone” for children to go to when they feel they need time to get their emotions back under control before they do something that will get them into trouble. Envision a school secretary handing two students a “Problem Solving Diary” to complete after being

Jacqueline A. Norris is an assistant professor of education at The College of New Jersey.

sent to the office for fighting during recess. Their answers will become the basis for their discussion with the principal and the consequences they will face for their actions. Well, I don’t have to imagine it; I lived it. It did not happen by coincidence. It took hard work, persistence, and a change in the way teachers, staff, and administrators thought, acted, and believed in themselves. It took an understanding of a concept called Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

In 1992 I became principal of a school that was being reconfigured from a K-5 building to a 4-5 intermediate school in response to a state desegregation mandate. The staff and I focused our energies on making sure furniture, textbooks, equipment, supplies, and classrooms were ready when school opened in September. What we did not understand was that we also needed to focus on planning and preparing for the new population of students, for the diversity among them, and, in many cases, the cultural gap between them and ourselves. We did not realize that planning was needed because “intergroup contact may reinforce previously held stereotypes and increase intergroup hostility unless the contact situation is structured in such a way that provides equal status for minority- and majority-group members and provides strong institutional support for positive relations” (Schofield’s 1978 study as cited in Norris, 1998, p. 30).

The school's student population went from being approximately 42% minority to 56% between June and September. While African Americans made up the largest minority group, they were closely followed by Asian students (the largest population in this group being students from India). Beyond race and ethnicity, we found that the greatest diversity was in the behaviors and attitudes some students brought with them. Negative behaviors such as arguing, name calling, teasing, and even fighting did not tend to manifest themselves during instruction time in class; however, in the unstructured times before or after school, on the bus lines, and at recess, there were incidents that spilled over into the classroom. Students who looked different or spoke differently from the majority of their peers experienced more victimization than others. Teachers used class time to settle disputes and soothe hurt feelings. Some parents living near the building became alarmed by what they perceived as daily fights. Our first year together was a real learning experience. There was much we would come to understand over the next few years.

This article will discuss what we learned and how we changed. It will present the concept of Social and Emotional Learning and show how our school staff used this approach to move closer to creating the kind of community where everyone felt safe, valued, and affirmed.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is an approach that teaches individuals to recognize, regulate, and express the social and emotional aspects of their lives so they can successfully manage life tasks. Some people have the ability to be naturally attuned to their emotions and those of others, but some do not. Fortunately, unlike IQ, the abilities that comprise "emotional intelligence" can be acquired and/or strengthened. SEL skills are designed to create attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions that promote healthy social relationships, personal well-being, and academic achievement. SEL is not a program, although there are hundreds of programs that address SEL issues. Leaders in the field of SEL believe that schools need to take a more programmatic approach where SEL behaviors permeate

every part of school life—the policies, curricula, instruction, and interactions of all who work and learn there (Elias, Arnold, & Hussey, 2003).

In 1995, Goleman published a book that has had a major impact on the field of education. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* connected brain research to learning, extended Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, and reenergized the character education movement. Goleman suggested that cognition alone is not enough for success in the classroom or, even more importantly, in life. Building on the work of Mayer and Salovey (1997), Gardner (1983), and many others, Goleman identified skills that children and adults need if they are to be able to navigate successfully through this very complex world in which we live. Two years later a group from the Collaborative for Academics Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), led by Maurice Elias, published *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (1997), a monograph that illustrated how emotional intelligence skills mapped onto schools. It identified 37 schools across the country that chose to address social intervention and prevention programs (e.g., drug awareness and prevention, AIDS education, delinquency, character education, and violence prevention) through a comprehensive programmatic approach. In these schools, respect, responsible behavior, sound decision making, and effective problem solving became integral parts of the culture. They form the core of social and emotional learning.

An effective comprehensive approach to SEL calls for a synthesis of all classroom and school-wide programs so educators and students see the commonality among themselves and begin to make a concerted effort toward achieving the goals these programs were intended to reach. Table 1 shows a list of the essential components of an SEL approach. The components are not new ideas; rather, they are a refocusing on what effective schools and teachers have known and done for decades. If we recognize that schools are social and emotional places and we are social and emotional beings, then we must place emphasis on more than our cognitive brain. An effective education must teach to the whole brain (Elias et al., 2003).

Table 1

Key Skills in Social and Emotional Learning

Self-Awareness

- Recognizing and naming one's emotions
- Understanding the reasons and circumstances for feeling as one does

Self-Regulation of Emotion

- Verbalizing and coping with anxiety, anger, and depression
- Controlling impulses, aggression, and self-destructive, antisocial behavior
- Recognizing strengths in and mobilizing positive feelings about self, school, family, and support networks

Self-Monitoring and Performance

- Focusing on tasks at hand
- Setting short- and long-term goals
- Modifying performance in light of feedback
- Mobilizing positive motivation
- Activating hope and optimism
- Working toward optimal performance states

Empathy and Perspective Taking

- Learning how to increase and develop feedback mechanisms for use in everyday life
- Becoming a good listener
- Increasing empathy and sensitivity to others' feelings
- Understanding others' perspectives, points of view, and feelings

Social Skills in Handling Relationships

- Managing emotions in relationships, harmonizing diverse feelings and viewpoints
- Expressing emotions effectively
- Exercising assertiveness, leadership, and persuasion
- Working as part of a team/cooperative learning group
- Showing sensitivity to social cues
- Exercising social decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Responding constructively and in a problem-solving manner to interpersonal obstacles

Source: Elias et al. (1997)

Effective Classroom Management

Research shows that any successful change that is to take place at the school level is directly related to the skill and ability of the teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Fitzgerald & Bass, 1997). The classroom climate they establish for themselves and their students greatly affects the learning process.

Of critical importance among the many roles that teachers play is that of creating a positive, supportive classroom environment based on a clear and well-organized management plan. Well-organized classroom management plans establish the parameters for the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual environments of the classroom. Classrooms where students feel safe to take risks, acquire new knowledge, and know they are valued members of a community are classrooms where learning is optimized (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2003; National Research Council, 2000; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). "Classroom management refers to all of the things that a teacher does to organize students, space, time, and materials so that instruction in content and student learning can take place" (Wong & Wong, 1998, p. 84). In other words, everything teachers do to get their students to achieve the knowledge and skills necessary for success must be the result of a purposeful and well-thought-out series of actions and activities.

Research also shows that building a sense of community in schools is an integral part of creating a positive learning environment (Evertson et al., 2003; Good & Brophy, 1997). Community building begins on the first day students and teachers come together. It is here that SEL can be integrated into classroom life. Here, SEL is seen not as an add-on for the teacher, but the way that relationships, routines, and procedures are established so everyone feels cared for, respected, and valued. Many teachers plan for icebreaker activities on the first day of school to acquaint students with one another. In an SEL classroom, however, this process continues throughout the school year. The teacher understands that building a skill is not the same as teaching a fact or concept. A skill is performance based; it is an iterative process that requires practice with feedback and the opportunity to make adjustments followed by more practice.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network recognized Social Decision Making (1989) and Responsive Classroom (1992) as two programs of merit (Elias et al., 1997). Teachers trained in these programs are taught to have daily gathering activities where students greet each other, as well as share and discuss their thoughts and feelings on issues such as current events, personal

experiences, and academic concepts. In these gatherings there are **clear rules for interaction**: Students must **listen to and respect each other**, and **no put-downs or thoughtless comments** can be made. Students learn what listening looks like and what it does not look like, because it cannot be assumed that knowing what to do also means knowing what not to do. These gatherings provide the chance for all students to become more than acquaintances and truly come to *know* one another. They help to create a climate where students are not afraid of taking risks, asking questions, or making mistakes because they know that any criticism they receive will be given in a respectful and constructive manner.

These **class gatherings, sharing circles, or morning meetings** are used as forums for discussing social problems that are taking place in the classroom or school. They may include role play to brainstorm and illustrate possible solutions to a problem that is reoccurring on the blacktop at lunch time or on the school bus. This is a productive and nonthreatening way of **providing students with behavioral options**. Gatherings may also be used to review material on upcoming tests, current events, or a piece of literature. Connecting the SEL strategy to academic content provides the opportunity for the repeated practice and reinforcement necessary to make these behaviors more generative in nature.

A fundamental SEL skill is the ability to recognize emotions as they are being experienced and to know appropriate ways of dealing with them. Thus language needs to exist to properly identify feelings. Young children and those with limited language proficiency have a very restricted emotional vocabulary. They may only know that they are happy, sad, glad, or mad. Developing this type of vocabulary, as in any other subject area, is necessary for clarity and fluency of description. Students also need to know that often they feel more than one emotion at the same time about the same event. They may be excited about going away on a vacation, but upset about the fact that they will miss their best friend's birthday party.

It should be made clear that there is nothing wrong with being angry or upset with someone or something; rather, it's what people do with that anger that makes the difference. Therefore, beyond naming their emotions, children need to know how

to act on their them appropriately. Activities that can help to provide them with a repertoire of responses to real-life situations must be a regular part of the classroom experience. Such activities include reading and discussing stories where the main character has had to deal with a range of emotions, or having students create role plays dealing with ways to handle strong emotions. Goleman (1995) tells us that girls, especially between the ages of 8-12, who confuse the emotions they are having, are at high risk for developing eating disorders in later adolescence. They may eat when they are angry or anxious instead of using that energy to exercise, write, or socialize with peers.

In SEL classrooms students are taught to use **Active Listening**, I-Messages, and other effective communications skills so that the interactions within the class are clear, positive, and supportive. In Active Listening, students learn to paraphrase messages they receive from others and check for understanding. I-Messages help to avoid blaming and accusations because students learn to express only how words or actions affect them. They learn to **empathize with their classmates** through pair-shares, role play, and class meetings. They also learn **decision-making and problem-solving skills** to help them develop skills in goal setting, consequential thinking, and coping strategies to deal with the conflicts, stresses, and challenges of life. The **integration of these skills into the academic content** teachers are required to teach allows for more and frequent opportunities to practice them. As **students learn to see issues from more than one perspective**, they also begin to apply and practice these skills in academic subjects. In language arts, for example, students can discuss or role play conflicts in a story or novel by taking on the perspective of various characters. Imagine dividing the class into Loyalists and Patriots to discuss the events leading up to the Revolutionary War. How much richer and more accurate an experience would it be if students examined America's westward expansion era from the viewpoint of the government, settlers, and Native Americans? This approach **helps students build empathy**, and having the ability to empathize means that we care about others. Goleman (1995) suggests that those who are deficient in this emotion often go on to commit horrible acts of violence.

The centerpiece of SEL is decision-making and problem-solving. These skills are the culmination of all the previously mentioned skills. Teaching students to recognize challenges and problems they face, set realistic goals to achieve or resolve them, generate alternative approaches based on consequential thinking, create a plan of action, and implement and evaluate that plan are life-long behaviors that need to be fostered from an early age. Our lives and personal relationships are influenced by the choices we make. Virtually every profession, every industry, has emphasized the need for individuals who can make well-informed decisions and problem solve both independently and interdependently.

SEL and the Standards

In any discussion about education or educational approaches today the issue of standards must be addressed. The standards movement has had a great influence on what and how things are done in classrooms across the United States. State and national standards seem to be driving instruction, assessment, professional development, and school schedules. Time is a luxury few can afford any longer. So asking teachers to add another thing to their day is likely to be met with skepticism, frustration, and possibly anger. Even those teachers who embrace the importance of teaching their students to have self-regulating behaviors, respect for themselves and others, and good decision-making and problem-solving skills feel the pull to address the multitude of academic criteria.

Fortunately, many commonalities exist between the standards and SEL. Effective communication skills and the ability to express thoughts and feelings accurately and clearly are central not only to SEL and standards but also to the assessment piece of the movement as well (Norris & Kress, 2000). Research showing that learning is more effective in classrooms that are nonthreatening and responsive to the needs of the students is also a powerful argument for the importance of these skills (Brophy, 1996). Nevertheless, the dilemma is how and where to incorporate these skills into an already overcrowded schedule.

Lessons Learned

For my staff and me, classroom management became the most logical home for SEL. It became

the way teachers established expectations, rules, and procedures, and it set the tone for the ways students would interact over the year. Part of our discipline plan was that students would complete a “Problem Solving Diary” that asked them to tell about the problem they were having, identify their goal, and generate some alternatives for approaching the problem that would yield a more positive result. Students learned a skill called, “Keep Calm,” which uses deep breathing to help get strong emotions under control before thoughtless negative actions were taken. This helped to greatly decrease the number of fights and confrontations at recess. Teachers learned to use a common language throughout the school and to set common standards of behavior for all children no matter where they were in the building. The teachers also found that the time it took to teach and practice these skills was regained as they became routines.

My staff and I also learned that creating this kind of school and classroom did not happen overnight. It did not happen in a year. However, over the five years that we worked together, there were many changes that took place in our school, our students, and ourselves. We all, to one degree or another, learned to listen and talk to each other, and we also learned that conflicts are a part of life. The differences among us never went away, nor should they have. What changed was our response to them. We chose to work and learn in an environment that valued knowledgeable, responsible, and caring individuals and recognized that our world was too diverse to live any other way. This was the culture and climate we created. SEL is an ongoing process; it is not a goal that can be completely achieved. We learned that every day we need to rededicate ourselves to its principles.

Directions for the Future

Much still needs to be learned about how SEL skills can benefit students at all levels. I am particularly interested in learning whether teachers who possess high levels of SEL competencies have greater job satisfaction and remain in the field of education longer than teachers who do not. If so, it would strengthen the argument that SEL needs to be not only part of the regular education program for public school students but also of teacher preparation

programs. And because teachers do not create the school environment alone, it would also be important to have SEL skills become a part of the preparation of school supervisors and administrators.

The ever growing diversity in public schools makes multiculturalism another important area to study. Today there is great concern regarding the growing achievement gap between genders and among different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups. It would be an enormous educational accomplishment to identify approaches that would narrow that gap. Children learn best in an environment that is safe, nurturing, and affirming (Elias et al., 1997). Classrooms where SEL skills are taught and practiced have been shown to create such an environment. Investigating the effect SEL skills might have on closing the achievement gap would be an important focus for future study.

Some schools are looking for programs to address bullying, conflict resolution, or peer mediation. Others are seeking ways to improve student achievement. Regardless of the concern, the foundation of the solution lies in having a culture and climate that supports civility and respect. Having more people who are knowledgeable, caring, responsible citizens can only help to bring us closer to the kind of society our ideals ascribe to us.

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