SEL & Academics

It is likely that every educator has directly experienced the positive and negative influences of affect on student learning. After all, what teacher has not felt the frustration of working with a capable student who has neither the motivation nor the perseverance to perform to capacity? What teacher has not seen a student's ability to concentrate in class regularly undermined by emotionally upsetting situations occurring inside or outside of school? Conversely, what educator has not experienced the joy of watching an enthused and engaged student test out new ideas, try out yet another one when the first doesn't work, and positively beam when they get finally achieve the desired result?

Such effective influences on learning, long recognized by teachers, are now also being increasingly corroborated by a body of research. Accumulating research makes the compelling case that social and emotional factors are integral to academic learning and positive educational outcomes for children. SEL has been found to improve academic attitudes (motivation and commitment), behaviors (attendance, study habits, cooperative learning), and performance (grades, test scores and subject mastery) (Zins et al., 2004). A recently completed research synthesis (or more formally, meta-analysis) of 270 SEL programs found that SEL interventions significantly improved students' attachment and attitudes towards school while decreasing rates of violence/aggression, disciplinary referrals, and substance use (Weissberg et al, manuscript in progress).

The influence of social and emotional factors on learning is confirmed by other studies, as well. Based on evidence from 61 educational researchers, 91 meta-analyses, and 179 handbook chapters, Wang, Haertel, and Wallberg (1997) found that social and emotional factors were among the most influential factors on student learning. Particularly high-ranking social and emotional components included classroom management, parental support, student-teacher social interactions, social-behavioral attributes, motivational-affective attributes, the peer group, school culture, and classroom climate. These experts concluded that directly influencing the psychological components of learning is an effective way of changing how much and how well students learn.

These findings fully comport with our understanding of the fundamentally social nature of learning, and the growing knowledge base on how emotions affect cognition and learning. It has been well-established, for instance, that the learning and healthy neurological development of infants occurs through social interactions with their caregivers (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and young children primarily learn through exploratory play with other children and adults (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Pianta, 1999; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). Likewise, children who succeed in school are engaged in active social and intellectual interactions with their peers and teachers; active participants in learning rather than passive recipients of knowledge; able to communicate effectively and ask for help when needed; and able to work well in cooperative learning groups (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997). SEL programming in schools can help students develop these social capacities, as well as develop the emotional resiliency to manage emotions that interfere with learning and concentration, and to preserve in the face of academic setbacks and challenges.

(continues)

Among the key findings linking SEL to academics, SEL:

Improves Academic Performance and Educational Outcomes

- In a quantitative review of 43 school-based SEL studies, SEL programs significantly decreased the number of suspensions and expulsions while improving school attendance, students' attitudes towards school, students' grades, and performance on achievement tests. The most impressive finding was students' improvement on standardized test scores, which increased by the equivalent of 14 percentile points (Dymnicki, 2006, manuscript in progress).

- Interventions designed to promote social and emotional development also improve long-term educational outcomes for students. For example, in a longitudinal study of one SEL program, adolescents in the intervention group, when compared to their peers, showed significantly greater school commitment and attachment to school and an 11 percent higher GPA. Students in the intervention group also had much lower incidences of problem behaviors such as violent delinquency, heavy alcohol use, and risky sexual behaviors (Hawkins et al., 1997).

Promotes Deeper Understanding of Subject Matter

- Integrating social and emotional learning with academic instruction is a particularly effective way of promoting both social-emotional and academic competence. For instance, when students are asked to use SEL skills such as perspective-taking and problem-solving to understand and analyze historical events or stories in a language arts class, learning in these content areas improves (Elias, 2004).

- Another program utilizing this technique exposes students to a high-quality reading and language arts curriculum drawn from diverse cultures. This intervention encourages students to explore the values and behaviors of characters in a wide variety of fictional situations, and teaches them to consider the needs and perspectives of others (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004). Findings from a program evaluation in 24 school districts revealed that the intervention positively impacted students' attitudes, motives, and ethical values. Most remarkable among the findings was that students in schools where the intervention was well implemented outperformed comparison students on district achievement tests and achieved higher grade point averages in a four year follow-up study. Preliminary findings from another recently released program from these same program developers, Making Meaning, which incorporates cooperative learning techniques into the reading curriculum indicated that student's reading comprehension scores were significantly improved after the first year.

Helps Students Learn Well with Others

- Incorporating cooperative learning techniques into the classroom enhances the quality of student learning and academic performance when compared to individualized learning. For example, Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000) quantitatively reviewed 164 cooperative learning articles and found that the 8 cooperative learning techniques evaluated significantly improved academic achievement. However, unless the students have good social and emotional skills, i.e., know how to manage and appropriately express emotions, solve

(continues)

problems, address conflicts, and understand the perspectives of others, the academic benefits of cooperative learning groups can be minimized or even negated (Munro, O'Brien, Payton & Weissberg, 2006; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996).

Increases Student Engagement in School

- Student perceptions of teachers' warmth and support, and of teachers as promoters of positive and respectful social interactions in the classroom, are significant predictors of student's academic motivation, engagement, and performance (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehard, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Osterman, 2000). A number of studies have found that students who are emotionally connected to their peers, who have "bonded" with adults who value learning and expect high levels of academic performance, adopt the value of academic achievement and have a positive academic orientation (Hawkins et al., 1999; Learning First Alliance, 2001).

- Bryk and Schneider (2002) also found that the quality of social relationships operating in and around schools predicts positive student outcomes. In schools characterized by high relational trust, educators are more likely to experiment with new practices and work together with parents to advance improvements. As a result, these schools are also more likely to demonstrate marked gains in student learning.

Decreases Behaviors that Interfere with Learning

- SEL programs, many of which have a prevention focus, decrease the prevalence of high-risk behaviors (e.g., student violence, and drug and alcohol use) that interfere with and detract from learning (Zins et al., 2004). In an extensive quantitative review of school based drug prevention studies, Tobler and Stratton (1997) found that interactive interventions that emphasized active student participation and the exchange of ideas between peers led to the greatest decrease in students' substance use. Likewise, SEL programs that foster engagement in school report reductions in problem behaviors such as drug use (Hawkins, Smith & Catalano, 2004), student misconduct and rebellious behavior in school (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993), and violence and sexual activity in later life (Hawkins et al., 1999).

Rather than diverting schools from their primary academic mission, improving the social and emotional competence of students and the climate of schools advances it. SEL also ensures that schools will address a broader mission of educating students to be good problem-solvers and caring, responsible, and engaged citizens. SEL learning fortifies students with the basic skills they need to be successful in school and more importantly in life.

References

- Blum, R.W., McNeely, C.A., & Rinehart, P.M. (2002). Improving the odds: the untapped power of schools to improve the health of teens. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Center for Adolescent Health and Development.
- Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L. and Cocking, R.R. (1999). How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school. National Academy Press.
- Bryk, A.S., & Schneider, B.L. (2002). Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Developmental Studies Center. Making meaning preliminary research results. Accessed Jan. 31, 2008.

- Dymnicki, A. B. The impact of school-based social and emotional development
- programs on academic performance. Master's thesis in progress, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago.
- Elias, M. J. Strategies to infuse social and emotional learning into academics. In J. E. Zins, R. P. Weissberg, M. C. Wang, H. J. Walberg (Eds). Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say? New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gottfredson, D.C., Gottfredson, G.D., & Hybl, L.G. (1993). Managing adolescent behavior: A multiyear, multischool study. American Educational Research Journal, 30(1), 179–215.
- Hawkins JD, Catalano RF, Kosterman R, Abbott RD, & Hill KG (1999). Preventing adolescent health-risk behaviors by strengthening protection during childhood. Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 153(3): 226–234
- Hawkins JD, Graham JW, Maguin E, Abbott RD, & Catalano RF (1997). Exploring the effects of age of alcohol use initiation and psychosocial risk factors on subsequent alcohol misuse. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 58(3): 280–290.
- Hawkins, J. D., Smith, B. H., & Catalano, R. F. (2004). Social development and social and emotional learning. In: J. E. Zins, R. P. Weissberg, M. C. Wang, & H. J. Walberg, (Eds), Building academic success on social and emotional learning. What does the research say? (pp. 135–150). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Isenberg, J., & Quisenberry, N. (1988). Play: A necessity for all children. A position paper. Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.
- Johnson, D. W. Johnson, R. T., & Stanne, M. B. (2000). Cooperative learning methods: A meta-analysis.
- Learning First Alliance. (2001). Every child learning: Safe and supportive schools. Washington, D.C.: Author
- Munro, S., O'Brien, M.U., Payton, J., and Weissberg, R.P. (2006). Cooperative learning helps create the essential skill of working (and compromising) within a group. Edutopia, 2(6), 53–58.
- Osterman, K. E. 2000. "Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community." Review of Educational Research. 70: 323–367.
- Pianta, R. C. (1999). Enhancing relationships between children and teachers. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Ryan, A.M., & Patrick, H. (2001). The classroom social environment and changes in adolescents' motivation and engagement during middle school. American Educational Research Journal, 38(2), 437–460.
- Salovey, P., & Sluyter, D. J. (Eds.). (1997). Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications. New York: Basic Books.
- Schaps, E., Battistich, V. & Solomon, D. (2004). Community in school as key to student growth: Findings from the Child Development Project. In J. Zins, R. Weissberg, M. Wang, & H. Walberg (Eds.), Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say? New York: Teachers College Press
- Shonkoff, J.P. and Phillips, D.A. (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. National Academy Press.
- Stevahn, L., Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., Real, D. (1996). The impact of a cooperative or individualistic context on the effectiveness of conflict resolution training. American Educational Research Journal, 33, 801–825.
- Tobler, N. & H. Stratton (1997). Effectiveness of school-based drug prevention programs: A meta-analysis of the research. Journal of Primary Prevention 18 (1), 71–128.
- Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1997). Learning influences. In H. J. Walberg & G. D. Heartel (Eds.), Psychology and educational practice (pp. 199–211). Berkeley, CA: McCatchan.
- Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Taylor, R. D., & Dymnicki, A. B. (2006). Does Promoting Social and Emotional Learning Enhance School Success: Results and Implications of a Meta-analysis, Manuscript in progress.
- Zins, J.,E., Weissberg, R.P., Wang, M.C., & Walberg, H.J. (Eds). (2004). Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say? New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Reproduced with permission from CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL.org).