

Social-Emotional Learning: A Critical Component of Global Economic Competitiveness

Much has been made in recent years about the value of integrating social-emotional learning instruction into K-12 education. It is typically argued on the premise of improving school climate or perhaps on the value of building students' life skills, but rarely on the basis of future workforce development. In fact, integration of social-emotional learning instruction not only benefits school climate and individual living skills, it is also imperative if we hope to prepare the students of today to be the workforce of tomorrow.

Background

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined as “programs that develop ‘core competencies’ to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively” (Durlak et al, 2011 as cited in Kyllonen, 2012). SEL is often used interchangeably with the term “non-cognitive skills,” - skills that are developed through schooling, but are not reflected in cognitive tests (Kyllonen, 2012). “Cognitive skills,” thus, are those that can be measured on standardized tests in subjects such as language arts, math, and science (Kyllonen, 2012).

In the last two decades, another term has emerged – “21st century skills.” This term has come to mean the set of skills that will prepare students to navigate the expected fast changing jobs of the future, that are expected to be notably different than the jobs of the past. Barbara Kurshan writes in *Forbes* (2017) that “the term ‘21st century skills’ is used often in educational circles to refer to a range of abilities and competencies that go beyond what has traditionally been taught in the classroom, including problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation.” Using this definition, there is an important overlap between 21st century skills – those skills that are presumed to help today's students be more competitive in the economy of tomorrow – and social emotional skills,

particularly those SEL skills focused on interpersonal relationship-building.

There is a solid research base to suggest that not only does the integration of SEL into school curricula have a positive impact on students as individuals, such integration also has a consequential impact on educational attainment and employment success. Multiple studies have found that non-cognitive skills are more predictive of educational attainment and employability than cognitive skills (Heckman & Rubenstein, 2001; Segal, 2012, Lindqvist & Vestman, 2011; as cited in Kyllonen, 2013). There is also significant evidence that social emotional skills can be intentionally taught in school. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning found in their meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs, that students who participated in these programs showed an 11-point advantage in academic achievement (Durlak, et al, 2011). This study suggests that not only do development of effective social emotional behaviors improve outcomes for students, but those behaviors can also be intentionally taught in schools.

SEL and Competitiveness

While much of the debate about competitiveness often centers around cognitive skill development, particularly in building content knowledge of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), social-emotional learning tends to be passed off as a nice bonus to the educational experience, but not essential to economic output. In fact, however, Thomas Friedman suggests that of the predicted top jobs of the future, many of them require productive social engagement with individuals from a variety of backgrounds and the ability to rapidly adapt to changing circumstances, hallmarks of the SEL paradigm. Only one of Friedman's jobs of the future depend heavily on content-specific knowledge in science or math (Friedman, 2007).

Similarly, a study of 400 human resources professionals found that the top five most

important skills for high school students to develop were: professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, oral communication, ethics/social responsibility, and reading comprehension (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006, as cited in Beland, 2007). This means that of the top five skills employers say they want students to have, at least two (teamwork and social responsibility) are explicitly taught in SEL programs, one is taught implicitly (professionalism, which is developed through self-regulation), and one is indirectly taught (oral communication is a function of social engagement).

Other countries have taken note of the importance of the social emotional development of their students. Marc Tucker notes in his book, *Surpassing Shanghai*, that both China and Finland, two of the countries with students who perform at the top of worldwide educational assessments, have recognized the importance of social skill development and self-management skills as they have overhauled their educational systems over the last 50-70 years. He notes that “Finnish industry leaders not only promoted the importance of math, science, and technology in the formal curriculum, but they also advocated for more attention to creativity, problem solving, teamwork, and cross curricular projects in the schools” (Tucker, 2011). In fact, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) added a collaborative problem-solving task to its 2015 exam, despite its typical focus on comparisons of student achievement in math, science, and reading (Kyllonen, 2012).

Potential Solutions & Stakeholders

Effectively integrating SEL instruction will require a concerted effort on the part of policymakers at all levels to invest not only financial resources, but also the time needed to provide effective training and support to teachers and school staff to integrate SEL practices into daily instruction and interactions. It also requires the time to support parents to cultivate these skills within a moral framework at home and a commitment to supporting the integration of social emotional learning into the school experience without feeling like it is taking away from “academic” skill development.

Yet, much of the pressure falls on teachers and school support staff, who will have to be on the

front lines of instructional integration and daily skill development. There are three strategies we can focus on to begin developing a more robust commitment to SEL:

1. Integration of social-emotional skill-building into content delivery
2. Professional development for all teachers in how to integrate SEL practices into instruction
3. SEL certificates and integration into graduate teaching programs

Often the inclination with “life skills” is to sequester instruction into its own separate time during the school schedule. However, social-emotional practices can be seamlessly integrated into instruction in all subjects and may even be more effective because the skills are applied within a “real-life” context. Doing so, however, requires intentionality on the part of educators and the ability to facilitate the social interactions that result from increased social engagement between students. Integration of these practices can take many forms: team-based projects in math or science, character analysis for SEL competencies in literature, healthy relationship skills in health courses, alternate history problem-solving simulations in social studies, the list goes on. For example, Beland (2007), shares an activity in an English class in which students analyzed stress indicators of the characters in *Romeo & Juliet*.

Such content integration requires practice and support for the educators and support staff who are tasked with providing these critical skills. Teachers who may have received their own education based on a paradigm of content delivery and assessment (i.e., lecture-and-test), may need support to see the benefit of integrating social skill development into their instruction both for learning and in the context of workforce development. Such a shift may, in some cases, require more time to deliver and assess skill development and may also be harder to assess content mastery. Additionally, there may be more facilitation required by the educator both during instruction and afterwards to help students reflect on their social skill development and further social problem-solving required between students as a result of the additional social interactions. Policymakers at all levels of government will need to make a concerted investment in scaffolded professional development opportunities and on-site support to help teachers of all skill levels

become adept at supporting students' social skill development.

Given these additional requirements of teachers, it would thus behoove us to develop a robust set of post-graduate incentives for teachers to engage in further professional development beyond what their districts or schools are able to provide. Proliferation of accredited micro-degrees or certificates in SEL practices which teachers can use to document their interest in or priority on SEL practices could be an important first step. Further, the development of advanced graduate programs in social emotional learning would provide additional academic priority to this critical aspect of student learning.

Conclusion

Simply put, if we don't invest in robust strategies for students' social-emotional development, we

imperil any long-term benefit we gain from our investment in cognitive skill development. Not only that, but countries who continue to perform at higher levels on cognitive educational exams have also recognized the importance of social skill development. Thus, if we choose not to prioritize SEL at all levels of our educational system, we risk falling behind in student performance on standardized cognitive exams. Even more, we will fall even further behind our global competitors as other countries' students are more effectively prepared for the jobs of the future.

Investment now in the social-emotional development of our students represents a critical strategy to impact individual student outcomes, the collective school experience, and American global competitiveness. It is rare to find such a high-leverage opportunity to influence multiple levels of educational outcomes.

References

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