

Social Emotional Learning and Academic Achievement

How can I set aside time for SEL when I have to spend so much time on test prep? How can I justify taking time to teach my students cool-down strategies when I'm supposed to be teaching the curriculum?"

These questions convey the pressures teachers face on a daily basis. Educators must simultaneously manage their classrooms, respond to student needs and meet academic learning objectives. It's common for teachers to feel that SEL and academic learning are mutually exclusive, a zero-sum game. "If I spend 'x' amount of time on SEL, I will lose 'x' amount of time on content." Yet infusing SEL into one's curriculum is not an either-or proposition. In fact, SEL and academic learning are completely interconnected. Years of research in neuroscience and education have revealed that SE competencies impact students' readiness for learning, their ability to fully engage in learning, their ability to work productively with others, and their ability to effectively handle challenges and set-backs (Zins, et al.) Studies also show that integrating SE skill-building into academic content areas can actually deepen students' understanding of the subject matter (Elias, 2004).

Interestingly, SEL has been a "hidden curriculum" in most classrooms- something not explicitly taught. Many educators take SEL for granted- they expect students to routinely display a host of SE competencies such as self-control, goal-setting, perspective-taking and active listening, in the classroom. Take Javon, a bright and inquisitive second grader who often calls out, rather than raising his hand, as is required by his teacher. While most of the students in his class have developed enough self-control to raise their hands appropriately, Javon has not. He is often reprimanded and placed in time-out where he misses instruction, fumes at his teacher, and is unable to concentrate on his work. Javon is experiencing a barrier to academic achievement caused by an SE skill deficit. Conversely, students with highly developed SE skill sets are able to take advantage of learning contexts and perform better than their peers. In my experience, most teachers recognize the role that SEL plays in the academic achievement of their students but feel hesitant about addressing SEL skills head-on.



Below are 3 steps for getting started.

1) Examine your hidden SEL curriculum.

Make a list of the types of SEL skills you expect- ing students to apply to academic activities. How well do they typically perform those skills? Which are most challenging for them? Are you generally punishing students' lack of skill development or providing them with opportunities to improve? To get a sense of the scope and sequence of the major SEL skill sets, refer to the SEL performance descriptors for grades 1-12 developed by the Illinois State Board of Education.

2) Choose 3 to 5. Trying to make every "hidden" skill part of the explicit curriculum may seem daunting. Luckily, you don't need to cover everything to be effective! In my experience, teachers who intentionally focus on 3-5 skills over the course of the year see pronounced results in the classroom. For example, I know a teacher who recognized that her 2nd grade students had difficulty settling down after recess. She decided to teach her students a calming strategy for transition times. Together, her students recite: "I settle myself in quiet to bring peace to the rest of my day." Then they take three breaths. This one simple skill increases her instruction time and helps her students develop an emotional management strategy they can use in school and beyond.

3) Teach, don't tell. Lectures don't cut it when it comes to SEL. Instead, use active learn-

ing strategies that generate interest and activate students' prior knowledge. Break each skill into its smallest parts and take your time with demonstration, practice, and feedback. Most importantly, ask students to apply the skill in various contexts, and have them monitor their progress. For example, once you have taught students how to demonstrate active listening, ask them to use this skill during group work, and provide them with a simple rubric to assess their use of the skill. And make sure you provide them with opportunities to apply the skill during academic instruction. For example, ask them to look for clues in a piece of literature that suggest a character is actively listening. Finally, have students reflect on and celebrate their own progress, throughout the year.

I hope you can see that integrating SEL into your classroom to increase academic learning is as easy as 1-2-3! I would be excited to hear about your challenges and successes with SEL integration this school year.



Christa M. Tinari is founder of PeacePraxis Training and Consulting (www.peacepraxis.com), Director of The Peaceful Schools Institute, Adjunct Professor of Education at Temple University, and champion of 'whole-child' educational practices. She provides SEL training and facilitates school climate improvement initiatives at K-12 schools.