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Social-Emotional Learning in a Time of Chaos

Abstract: Over the last generation public schools in the United States have strongly emphasized student achievement as measured by standardized tests. In this paper the role Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) can play in improving student success is emphasized. Research on SEL has shown that student achievement is positively affected by SEL programming. Yet, an argument continues over how the limited time in the classroom is used. As the world faces a pandemic during which students are often not attending school in person, their social-emotional health is of increased concern.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL); academic achievement; COVID pandemic; mindfulness

摘要 (約翰·邦德：混亂時期的社會情感學習)：在上一代的美國公立學校中，強烈強調通過標準化的考試來衡量學生的成績。本文強調了社交情感學習 (SEL) 在提高學生成功率方面所能起到的作用。關於 SEL 的研究表明，學生的學習成績受到 SEL 進程的積極影響。然而，關於如何利用課堂上有限時間的一項爭論仍在繼續。由於世界正面臨一種大流行病，在這期間學生常常不能親自上學，因此他們的社交情感健康問題日益受到關注。

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Zusammenfassung (John B. Bond: Sozial-emotionales Lernen in einer Zeit des Chaos): In der letzten Generation haben öffentliche Schulen in den Vereinigten Staaten den Schwerpunkt stark auf die Leistung der Schülerinnen und Schüler gelegt, die durch standardisierte Tests gemessen wird. In diesem Beitrag wird die Rolle betont, die das sozial-emotionale Lernen (SEL) bei der Verbesserung des Schülererfolgs spielen kann. Forschungen über SEL haben gezeigt, dass die Leistung der Schüler durch die SEL-Programmierung positiv beeinflusst wird. Dennoch wird weiterhin darüber diskutiert, wie die begrenzte Zeit im Klassenzimmer genutzt wird. Da die Welt vor einer Pandemie steht, bei der die Schüler oft nicht persönlich zur Schule gehen, ist ihre sozial-emotionale Gesundheit von zunehmender Besorgnis.

Schlüsselwörter: Sozial-emotionales Lernen (SEL); schulischer Erfolg; COVID-Pandemie; Achtsamkeit

Резюме (Джон Б. Бонд: Социально-эмоциональное обучение в период хаоса): На современном этапе общественные школы в США особенно отчетливо сместили акцент в сторону усиленного контроля за успеваемостью школьников, которая измеряется с помощью стандартизированных тестов. В данной статье подчеркивается роль социально-эмоционального обучения в улучшении учебных показателей школьников. Исследования в данной области показали, что применение данной технологии обучения положительно влияет на успеваемость учеников. Тем не менее продолжают дискуссии относительно того, как максимально эффективно использовать то ограниченное время, которым располагает учитель на уроке. Поскольку сейчас из-за пандемии дети не могут посещать школу, как раньше, серьезную тревогу вызывает их социально-эмоциональное состояние.

Ключевые слова: социально-эмоциональное обучение, учебный успех, пандемия COVID-19, предосторожность

Social-Emotional Learning in a Time of Chaos

As we are amid a global health crisis it is timely to reflect on how education is being impacted and what the future may bring. This situation has been further complicated by the nation-wide protests regarding how people of color are treated. Two major problems have become intertwined in the daily news,

conversations, and individual reflections. Over the last few months, they have become focal points in the discussion in university classes, as well as throughout the K-12 school systems.

School leaders across the world are currently faced with unexpected challenges not faced in the past. Care of those that they serve is the underlying priority, which is something about which we all should be proud. Few, if any, are currently speaking out about failing schools as measured by test scores. Rather, the attention of educators and parents is focused on the safety and social-emotional support of students. Hopefully, when we are beyond this time of crisis we will be able look back with pride on how priorities were re-set to match emergent needs. It is a moment in time when Social-Emotion Learning (SEL) needs to be a priority.

Social-Emotional Learning: What is it?

While SEL is increasingly prominent today, it is not an innovation. SEL has deep roots going back decades (Deluna, 2017; Osborne, 2017). It has been defined as an approach that enhances students' intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competence (Weissberg, Duriak, Domitrovich, & Gullatta (2015). SEL is seen as an influence on the quality of the learning environment, as well as its impact on individual students (Denham & Brown, 2010). SEL includes competencies that "involve skills that enable children to calm themselves when angry, initiate friendships and resolve conflicts respectfully, make ethical and safe choices, and contribute constructively to their community" (Payton, Weissberg, Durlack, et al., 2008).

Relevance of SEL

Over the last decade there has been a large increase in publications related to Social-Emotional Learning. The interaction between social-emotional health and student learning is a common focus of research, teacher professional development, and application in the classroom. It has become an approach to enhance the success of students often academically challenged due to non-academic issues. The focus on SEL appears to be driven by dual goals, one of serving the personal needs of student and the other of increasing their academic success (Lawlor, 2016). Both are certainly priorities and it is arguable which is of most importance.

Today, as the world faces a pandemic, the concept of social-emotional learning of high importance. With schools operating remotely, students are experiencing a dramatic change in their social interactions. If we accept, as research proposes (Lawlor, 2016), that student learning is enhanced by SEL, it behooves educators to place strong emphasis on it at this time.

How this can be done, obviously, is a challenge. It should be expected that students who benefit most by SEL will be most vulnerable during the current circumstances.

In June of 2020 as the world was in the midst of a pandemic, Amy Bintliff published an article that focused on the importance of helping students help themselves (Bintliff, 2020). Bintliff emphasized how teachers should be thoughtful about their language during this time of uncertainty. Rather than just asking students how they are feeling "as a way to gauge well-being, opportunities are missed to teach students that well-being is a multidimensional concept that encompasses more than just happiness" (Bintliff, 2020). Bintliff further defined well-being as having two definitions that students need help in understanding, both of which are consistent with SEL. The first is in the hedonistic tradition having to do with satisfaction with life, pleasures of life, and happiness. The other is the eudaimonic tradition that focuses on personal strengths, areas of growth, and how one can contribute to the greater good. Bintliff emphasized that teachers should help students grasp these concepts to help them deal with the trauma and uncertainty of the current situation in the world. Bintliff stated in her timely article that responding to the social and emotional needs of students is essential as educators navigate the current chaos of their work.

Literature Review

While Social-Emotional Learning is prominent in the literature today, it has grown over time from a base of long-standing scholarly work (Deluna, 2017; Osborne, 2017). This includes the whole child movement of the 1970s and 1980s and long before that to the influence of John Dewey and others (Deluna, 2017). Concern about students' personal needs long preceded the major shift to student outcomes that were sparked by publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the ensuing emphasis on standardized testing. In the last decade, though, renewed efforts have been made to support students beyond instruction targeting academic performance. Interestingly, this growing attention to the social and emotional learning of students has also led to increased academic performance (Humphrey, Landrum, & Wigelsworth, 2020). In addition to improved social-emotional behavior, student achievement is being shown as a positive outcome of SEL (Denham, Bassett, Mincic, Kalb, & Way, 2014; Zins, Payton, Weisberg, & O'Brien, 2007).

SEL History

Over the last decade SEL has become increasingly relevant as educators focus on the well-being of students. However, it is a movement that has deep roots going back to such giants of education as Horace Mann and John Dewey (Deluna, 2017). In her article on the history of social emotional learning, Melissa Deluna presented a timeline of SEL practice beginning in 1830 with Mann's Common Schools that were open to all children, regardless of socioeconomic background. The timeline progresses through the foundation of the first Montessori School in 1911, John Dewey's concept of social responsibility in 1916, and Vygotsky's social cultural theory in 1962. Emphasis was placed on the work of James Comer in the 1960s that included a focus on student behavior issues and eliminating school procedures that aggravated such problems (Deluna, 2017; Osborne, 2017). Deluna also described the contributions to social emotional learning to current SEL models. This includes summaries of the work of such theorists as Claude Steiner, Stephen Covey, and Daniel Goleman. Deluna concluded that "curriculum trends have evolved to meet the student's needs as educators and researchers continue to develop tools to meet the development through life stages (2017)."

SEL and Student Learning

An ongoing debate among educators is how an emphasis on SEL impacts learning. While increasingly SEL is seen as enhancing student learning, it is not a universal opinion among educators. Some are concerned that allocating time for SEL negatively impacts student learning due to the loss of instructional time (Humphrey et al., 2020). This argument gets to the heart of the challenge when implementing SEL. Educators are now several decades into emphases on student learning as measured by standardized tests. It is understandable that teachers would be cautious about giving up academic time when they are often evaluated on measures of student achievement.

While the body of research on SEL and student learning seems to be in its early years, there have been hundreds of scholarly articles published over the last decade. Consistently, research offers hope for the future of SEL programming (Payton et al., 2008). Payton and colleagues (2008) reported in three meta-analyses patterns of significant academic growth when comparing students with and without SEL interventions. Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Taylor, Oberle and colleagues (2017) found SEL interventions were associated with positive student academic performance. A link between academic and social learning stands out in this body of research. The impetus for embracing SEL is much more than an instructional fad, but rather, is supported by scholarly research.

SEL is increasingly seen as a conceptual framework that guides a mission for an entire school (Lawlor, 2016). Such terms as mindfulness, the whole child, and social-emotional learning are often used to describe efforts to promote both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Lawlor, 2016). Over the last two decades SEL has been embraced by many as an approach and strategy to improve student learning (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015; Zins, Payton, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2007).

Educational Equity and Excellence

An important emphasis in SEL programs is on issues related to race, ethnicity, and poverty. Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) described this approach as transformative SEL which is intended to promote equity and excellence for a broad range of learners. Payton and colleagues (2008) reported a finding in that “the effects of SEL programs are achieved among student populations that are ethnically and socio-economically diverse and for students both without presenting behavioral or emotional problems and those exhibiting early difficulties.” Similar to the argument related to student achievement, the benefits to diverse populations of students justify adoption of SEL approaches.

A related issue to that of equity is how SEL is supported by school policy. In an era when academic programs and curricula have been the primary emphases, approaches that focus on supporting students socially and emotionally have been of lower priority. This issue was identified over a decade ago by Denham and Brown (2010). The authors argued for inclusion of SEL skills as an approved part of school curriculum. Denham and Brown stated that school policies must include programming that is aimed at positively improving the learning environment. It is a debate that continues today.

Discussion

A large body of research exists regarding the social aspects of learning. While it was not the purpose of this paper to complete an exhaustive study of related research, it is important to acknowledge that SEL is a huge and rapidly growing construct. For example, a Google Scholar search for the abbreviated term *SEL and academic achievement* resulted in over 3 million hits. While a rough measure, it does indicate the size of the construct. SEL is not a new theory or practice, but one that has grown out of decades of scholarly endeavor. The links between SEL and student learning offer a strong rationale for purposefully including SEL as part of the school policy, curriculum, and practice.

The history of SEL as reviewed by Deluna (2017) and Osborne (2017) is both broad and deep. It is not a new construct, but one with roots in the work of prominent theorists such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and James Comer (Deluna, 2017). At a time in education when the term SEL is increasingly included in discussions regarding curriculum and pedagogy, it is important to remember that it is not a new concept. While practices and terminology have evolved, the central emphases on supporting students have remained consistent.

As a pandemic has impacted schools and student learning, emphasizing SEL is of high importance. Students, teachers, and parents are all most concerned with the safety and mental health of students. And, such an emphasis will prepare and sustain students as learners during a time of anxiety and uncertainty. The well-being of students must be of high priority at this time (Bintiff, 2020), which is at the core of SEL. The motivation for emphasizing SEL at this time may be driven by a desire to support students during a time of high stress and worry. Yet, ironically, such an emphasis also has a positive affect on student learning (Payton et al., 2008; Taylor, Oberle et al., 2017; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015; Zins, Payton, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2007).

Conclusion

While we hope that we will never again be faced with a challenge like the current COVID crisis, it is possible that the experience will have lasting change on teaching, schools, and leadership. After a sudden and chaotic immersion into full online schooling, educators have quickly adapted to change. Even though there has been a gradual increase in online programming over the last decade, the current pandemic has forced a sudden pivot from traditional to distant learning. Those who resisted online platforms are now engaged and learning new technical skills and instructional pedagogy. This is a change that will likely impact the future of instruction and learning at all levels. Hopefully, it will be a positive outcome of an overwhelmingly negative experience. However, there is also the potential for a more significant change

than just how instruction is delivered. Perhaps, we will re-evaluate our core values and mission as educators.

Reflecting on Our Purpose. Over recent decades since the time of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) there has been a focus on student achievement as the most important aspect of schooling. Major change has resulted as we have emphasized test scores, monitored school performance, and focused on instructional practice and evaluation of teachers. However, during this time of emergency the emphases are elsewhere. Educators, school systems, and politicians are currently placing the strongest importance on caring for the physical and social-emotional aspects of those they serve. Such issues as access to technology, nutrition, day care, and even housing far outweigh worries about improving test scores. It raises an important question regarding how we have been addressing these fundamental issues, and obviously, how we will do so in the future.

As we continue through this time of stress, anxiety, and the unknown, perhaps we are on a path toward significant and sustained change. Maybe a renewed vision of school will emerge with the highest priorities focused on equity, caring, and engagement. If so, student achievement might become a by-product of how the whole person is nurtured, rather a narrow measure of success or failure. As a positive outcome to this crisis we may step back and reflect on our priorities as educators. The measures of success may be extended beyond student achievement and include the social and emotional growth of students. If so, some good may come out of the terrible circumstances with which we are now coping. And, who knows, as a result maybe test scores will go up.

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