

Review

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Mental Health Work and Social Emotional Learning Within Schools

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Abstract: There is a gap in the literature surrounding preventive mental health care in education. This paper addresses the civic issue of mental health work and social emotional learning (SEL) within schools in the United States (US). I will demonstrate the ways in which social emotional learning can support the diverse needs of school-based populations while ethically supporting students, their families, and the larger community. Professional development focusing on social emotional learning, paired with extra support and oversight, could be a potential solution for closing this gap. The paper answers an important question: Can social emotional learning act as preventive care in US schools?

Keywords: Psychology; Social Emotional Learning; Mental Health; K-12 Education; Teaching Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Within the American healthcare sector, there is a field in which actions are taken to prevent injury and illness to the human body, called preventive care. This could look like pre-surgery physical therapy or taking vitamin D to boost the immune system. However, mental health is not included, leaving mental health care to be reactive in nature, as opposed to proactive. In this paper, I theorize that social emotional learning in US schools can serve as preventative care. I ground my argument in two primary articles: Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) and Cohen (2006). Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) tell us that there are ethical considerations we need to give when teaching social emotional learning. It is only possible to educate the whole child when also providing ethical education. Cohen (2006) re-emphasizes how important SEL is, but goes further, noting that this work is necessary for all students, especially those who

are historically disenfranchised.

This research is important for multiple reasons. First, social emotional learning benefits all who are a part of the learning process. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) tells us that SEL helps those learning it, those teaching it, and the families of those receiving it (<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/>). Students become more resilient and pay better attention to their mental health as a result of SEL (Labelle, 2019). Second, social emotional learning is just beginning to find its rhythm within schools. As a subset of educational psychology, SEL has the opportunity to flourish in the near future. Meaning, as educational psychology research grows, so will social emotional learning. Emerging research means more precise strategies or recommendations will be published, ever expanding the field. And third, SEL minimizes the harm that has been historically sustained in educational



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spaces (Divecha & Brackett, 2020). Divecha and Brackett's 2020 analysis focuses on SEL strategies for elementary school students in kindergarten through sixth grade, with only one demographic of students prioritized in order to narrow the scope of pedagogy. Additionally, a group called *Responsive Classroom* (RC) used these competencies to create concrete ways in which teachers can engage in SEL on a daily basis.

2. Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community". Those who address mental health within a school setting are considered mental health workers. These professionals are comprised of school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses.

School districts, individual schools, and mental health professionals do all they can with the funding and personnel they have. Nonetheless, statistics from 2025 are staggering and demonstrate how schools are struggling to meet the need of their students. According to The National Center for Education Statistics, over half of public schools reported an increase in students requesting school-based mental health services from the prior year. However, only half of US schools reported that they were able to provide mental health services to *all* the students in need. This means that the need for services outweighed the available professionals. As such, approximately 50% of schools listed "access to mental health professionals" as a barrier to providing support to students requesting mental health services. Further, 55% of public schools reported having mental health professionals who worked an overwhelming caseload. This statistic means while there were mental health professionals at those schools, they were overwhelmed and overworked. Also important for consideration is the acknowledgement that these are just statistics on the students who asked for help, not counting those who need help but do not know how to ask or are unwilling to ask for help. Only 9% of US public schools reported having no barriers to mental health services for its students.

This indicates that the number of students who need mental health services have grown in the past

few years, potentially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, "more than 1 in 3 high school students experienced poor mental health during the pandemic and nearly half of students felt persistently sad or hopeless" (Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey [ABES], 2022). As a result, students are not able to receive the mental health resources they need (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI]).

3. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Ethical Education

Social emotional learning is "the process of acquiring the self-awareness, self-mastery, and decoding skills necessary to negotiate the social and emotional landscape of our world" (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017, p. 3). SEL is important because this pedagogy allows students to develop their whole person through autonomy, curiosity, and bravery. According to Bar-On (2005), Cohen (2001; 2006), and Elias et al. (1997) (as cited by Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017)), SEL "helps children to become healthier, happier people, as well as active and engaged citizens" (p. 2). This creation happens through learning and engaging in ways which connect students to their emotions and to each other, as "authentic connections are the natural way to support health, biological norms, and emotional balance" (Adair, 2019, p. 21). The primary ways by which students immerse themselves in SEL is through CASEL's five competencies, colloquially referred to as the CASEL 5.

According to CASEL's website, the CASEL 5 address "five broad and interrelated areas of competence and highlights examples for each: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (www.casel.org). These five competencies are then broken down into more specific categories, thereby allowing educators and adults to create more distinct ways in which to utilize each topic.

Interestingly enough, it has long been assumed that SEL teaches ethical values (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017). First consider the meaning of "ethics" and "morals" in relation to education. "Ethical" or "ethics" refers to the moral principles by which a person lives their life, specifically applied to questions of correct behavior within specific situations (Merriam-Webster).

Second, Merriam-Webster defines “moral” as “of or relating to principles of right or wrong in behavior”, often sanctioned by one’s conscience. This means that deciding what is right and what is wrong comes from a person’s conscience, which informs morality, which then forms personal ethics. Through CASEL teachings, students learn who they are, how they feel, and how they impact others. This directly impacts how a person understands what is “right” versus “wrong”. Within ethical education, teachers ask you to consider: How do we determine what is right and what is wrong? Now we can connect the two, seeing as SEL helps students create bridges of understanding for which ethical education can thrive.

Social emotional learning addresses proactive ways in which we interact with ourselves and others, acting as a form of decoding. For example, a fictitious student named Jane has learned all the CASEL 5 and works well with others in class. However, she is also manipulative and uses others to reach personal goals. Education about ethical competence needs to include why students should act the ways they do and what motivations they may have for acting that way. In the same example, Jane would need to learn about why manipulating others for her own gain is not ethical. Levinson and Fay (2019) tell us that children need to learn that “words can be wrong, they can hurt, and they can trigger reactions” (p. 20).

Words can hurt, but words also have the ability to connect. Cohen (2006) tells us that students can practice interacting with people outside of their ingroups through community building, perspective-taking, and engaging in learning partnerships. Children naturally gravitate towards those similar to themselves from a young age, creating ingroups. While this is to be expected as a child, it is imperative that children grow further, soliciting peers from all different groups. “Peer connections at school play an important role in the development of belief systems” (Adair, 2019, p. 28). As such, Cohen (2006) found that collaborative and creative peer interaction outside of ingroups is especially beneficial for White students. Focusing on a collaborative task enables students to concentrate on something almost free of implicit bias. In essence, collaborative learning processes (like SEL) allow students from all walks of life to interact with each other. After all, “health, emotional wellness, authentic

cultural connections, and the ability to learn are codependent” (Adair, 2019, p. 15).

4. SEL as Preventive Care

Actions are considered preventive in nature when they include ongoing maintenance. This could include yearly teeth cleanings, eye exams, or even taking your car to the shop once a year. According to HealthCare.gov, preventive services are defined as “routine health care that includes screenings, check-ups, and patient counseling to prevent illnesses, disease, or other health problems” (<https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/preventive-services/>). SEL fits within this definition because certain behaviors and skills are operationally defined, which indicates a significant impact of risk-prevention, therefore adding to health-promotion research (Cohen, 2006, p. 206). Addressing problems as they arise is *reactive* and assumes there must be harm done before care can ensue. Addressing problems before they arise is *proactive*, ensuring the well-being of individuals before harm.

SEL is proactive, and therefore preventive, due to the ways in which the competencies are enacted. In order to fully demonstrate this, I will go point by point and give examples as written by CASEL. **Figure 1** provides a visual depiction of the competencies if desired. Within the competency of “self-awareness”, children will be able to demonstrate empathy and awareness for themselves and others. In “self-management”, students are taught to identify and use stress management strategies, as well as how to exhibit self-discipline. In “responsible decision-making”, children learn how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts. Within “relationship skills”, students are taught to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts constructively. And finally, in “social awareness”, children are expected to demonstrate empathy and compassion, as well as showing concern for the feelings of others. Each of these competencies enable skills which teach children how to think before they act, consider the feelings of others, and work collaboratively in groups (www.casel.org).

While the CASEL 5 may seem to be entirely theoretical in nature, there are many substantiated ways in which SEL can be enacted. Adair (2019) lists many examples in *The Emotionally Connected Classroom*, such as daily intentions, which are a great way for students to

create goals at the beginning of their day. Intentions are not only beneficial for the student (thereby supporting student agency) but also the teacher, as the daily intention can convey how the student is doing. In a similar vein, it has become increasingly prevalent for children to come to school not knowing how to read aloud or how to speak in a large room of peers. In this way, teachers can integrate small lessons of SEL into their everyday assignments, such as how to speak loudly/clearly and with conviction (aka “with your chest”). There is tremendous value in knowing your voice has power and that every person deserves to be acknowledged in a learning environment.

Students who are left to their own devices, disregarded and unseen, turn into adolescents who feel disconnected from their peers, who then go on to struggle as adults. This is exactly why emotionally dysregulated classrooms are a threat to learning and human connection. Too much or too little dopamine in a student’s nervous system results in limited memory and attention span (Adair, 2019). Moreover, if students have decreased endorphins, they are more likely to experience “excessive sensitivity to physical and/or emotional pain” (Adair, 2019, p. 82). Given this information, it is truly no wonder American students are struggling in schools, as dysfunctional behavior can reflect a survival mode response (Adair, 2019). Adair (2019) theorizes that there are a variety of modern-day disconnections which jeopardize our ability to feel connected to one another as humans. He then lists six major “disconnecting pressures” which could contribute to the dysregulation: trauma, modern extrinsic messages, parenting, ultra-safety, disconnected education, and technology. By being aware of these influences, educators can make informed decisions regarding student interest and participation.

So, there are bound to be students who slip through the cracks. Historically, these students are those who are systematically marginalized, such as those who are from lower-class families, identify as students of color, and/or students who claim disability status. Even considering all the influencing factors which impact a student on a normal day, it is essential that we, as educators, provide every child with the opportunity to learn. For that reason, it then becomes our duty to ensure that, truly, no child is left behind. This is where this paper comes in, as SEL allows people to

understand others and the world on a deeper basis. SEL centers the human experience and creates an understanding of self and others, thereby acting as preventive care.

5. Responsive Classroom (RC)

Many teachers knowingly (or perhaps unknowingly) use SEL strategies when reading particular literature or showing certain media to their students. This could take the form of books such as *It’s Okay to be Different* and *Wonder*, or through watching shows such as *The Magic School Bus*. However, a more purposeful way of using SEL is through a professional development training called *Responsive Classroom*. As *Responsive Classroom’s* website states, “*Responsive Classroom* is an approach to teaching based on the belief that integrating academic and social-emotional skills creates an environment where students can do their best learning. The *Responsive Classroom* approach consists of a set of practices and strategies that build academic and social-emotional competencies” (<https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/about/principles-practices/>). Transparency, valuing multiple perspectives, and valuing student well-being are three tenets within *Responsive Classroom* pedagogy which are vital to encouraging social emotional learning.

For elementary school students, this would look like doing daily morning meetings, establishing rules (and displaying them in multiple formats in the classroom and online), encouraging energizers, quiet time, and closing circle. Morning meetings set the tone of the day and can include a reminder about classroom rules. Many schools in Colorado do this as to familiarize students with their daily policies and practices. Energizers are used to break up long school days using yoga, breathing exercises, and silly dancing games. Quiet time provides students with a chance to calm their bodies and minds during a hectic school day. Finally, closing circles give students the space to reflect upon their day. One of my personal favorites to engage in during closing circles is an activity called Rose, Bud, Thorn. Each person reports their personal rose, bud, and thorn of the day. Rose is something you enjoyed about your day, bud is something you are looking forward to, and thorn is something you did not like about the day. Rose, bud, thorn gives students and adults the opportunity to reflect upon their day,

identifying both positive and negative aspects of it. Reflection is an important part of the SEL process, as it informs us how to act in the future.

6. Reflection and Conclusion

Upon reflecting on the topic of this paper, I can't help but draw conclusions as to why I chose this topic. I know I am an anxious human with many autistic traits. But because I excelled academically in elementary school and beyond, no one was concerned when I became extremely anxious over tests or struggled in social situations. Perhaps I did not receive mental health care or extra support in school because I was viewed as neurotypical and was in advanced classes. Whatever the reason, I do believe that with support and social/emotional education, I could have prevented a lot of trauma over the course of my life. As should be evident by now, social emotional learning is more than just learning about emotions. SEL is about identifying and regulating emotions, as well as recognizing the needs of others, and how these revelations interact with the world around us.

Social emotional learning can be utilized to create lasting positive change. Coburn (2003) writes that this can be achieved through a focus on depth, sustainability, spread and transfer of ownership of the

learning material. Depth addresses what exactly was done and asks whether the changes went deeply enough to create a culture of change. Sustainability involves asking stakeholders what policies were put in place to safeguard longevity. Spread of ownership is ensuring that all people within education (board of directors, administration for district, administration for schools, educators, students, and families) understand and commit to the changes. Transfer of ownership means knowing who is responsible for overseeing the changes and making sure that people are held responsible.

Social emotional learning strategies can be used by students, educators, and parents alike, as well as anyone who wishes to better themselves. In the context of this paper, I used Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) and Cohen (2006) as the primary texts by which to ground my research and topic. I then used a variety of articles and texts to demonstrate how social emotional learning is beneficial and how it can act as preventive care. In all the articles referenced, authors expressed how important it is to pay attention to how education impacts students socially and emotionally. In conclusion, SEL should be used as a preventive measure, thereby taking the enormous pressure off current mental health workers in American schools.

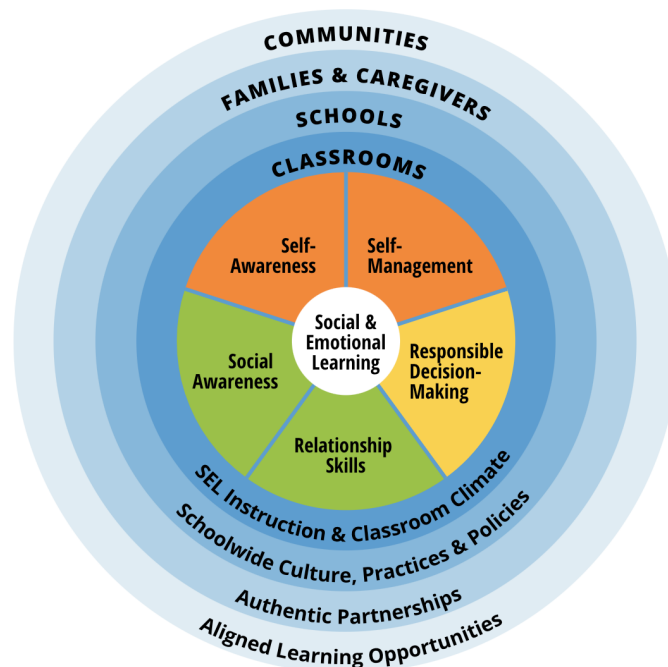


Figure 1. CASEL Wheel

Note. This graphic is taken directly from CASEL's website on the five primary competencies.

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