

My Story: Implementing Social and Emotional Learning Programs In School

Science was my not-so-favorite class. My science teacher absurdly disrespected me. We were assigned a packet to do and she requested it to be done the following week. I completed the packet with ease and had no problems and did not copy anybody's work. I turned it in because it was a significant impact on my grades. She came back with feedback 2 days later and gave me zero percent. I instantly contacted her to see why I got the grade I got and it was because she assumed that I "copied" another classmate of mine because we had the same answers. It was no coincidence that the student whose work looked just like mine was a white male classmate. Yet, I was assumed guilty. This was an assault on my character; I am not a cheater. This experience demonstrates how my teacher lacks empathy and operates with a cultural bias, with very real implications for students. She always sees one way through a problem and doesn't even care for listening. I felt very disconnected and disrespected. I know more students are being treated like this because students talk to each other and I've heard their stories. Connecting this experience to other students experiences of feeling silenced, misinterpreted, and judged falsely makes us tired. Why put forth the effort when it will be assumed that I've taken a shortcut or that somehow my work is not credible? This leads to students feeling unmotivated to do any work and more likely to feel disrespected by their teachers. Restoring the teacher-student relationship is a necessity for all schools.

Teacher-Student Relationships

In schools today, teachers lack empathy and are unaware of the importance of building relationships with students. This leads to lower grades, a decrease in attendance, followed by higher school dropout rates. Schools should implement a social emotional learning (SEL) program to build and maintain positive relationships and to help students set and achieve strong goals. According to *Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter* an article published in Education Week, "Students spend more than 1,000 hours with their teacher in a typical school year" (Sparks, 2019). Keeping a relationship with a teacher can be important to how well students learn. Improving students' relationships with

teachers has important, positive and long-lasting implications for both students' academic and social development. According to a comprehensive review of educational research, “teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short- and long-term improvements on practically every measure schools care about: high student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower dropout rates” (Sparks, 2019). Students will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflict in their relationships with teachers.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

“Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2019). Having this process implemented through schools give students more of a connection to express their feelings. Emotion is a powerful thing and not being able to express it can put you in a crazy mindset. You know this if you’ve ever been in a scenario where you don’t have anyone to listen to you. SEL can change students’ school experiences entirely if it is implemented at a high level. I think schools jump right into academics and dismiss or minimize the importance of relationships. For teachers, often their primary goals include teaching students to try hard and behave in class. However, I think teachers should feel respected knowing that their students are listening to them and vice versa for the students. This does not happen without work, it happens through building intentional relationships with students. Some of the ways teachers build positive relationships with students include: knowing and correctly pronouncing their students names, asking students how they are doing in and outside of school, and making themselves available for students to talk to before, during, or after classes. It is always helpful to offer students help, create a positive climate, help students reflect on their thinking and learning skills.

SEL programs have shown a powerful impact on students’ academic success. A 2011 meta-analysis study, involving more than 270,000 students, showed that those who

participated in SEL programs showed an 11% point gain in academic achievement (Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R.D., Schellinger, K.B., 2011).

In addition to increased academic success, the impact of SEL improves lifetime outcomes outside of school. For example, research has shown that “SEL decreased the likelihood of living in or being on a waiting list for public housing, receiving public assistance, having any involvement with police before adulthood, and ever spending time in a detention facility” (CASEL, 2019). SEL offers tremendous possibilities for students and families both in the short and long term. As our income inequality, access to affordable housing, and disproportionate disciplinary referrals in schools continue to grow, it is more important than ever for schools to incorporate SEL programs.

Implementing SEL in Schools

There are five essential skills and competencies for students in SEL: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision making (Elias, 2016). Elias suggests a series of seven interrelated activities that will likely take a few years to put in place. In what follows, I described the seven activities.

Activity 1: Building School Infrastructure to Support SEL

First would be building a school infrastructure that can support SEL. Meaning, creating a committee that is responsible for the long term implementation of SEL. Having a primary goal and an action plan to accomplish it, along with holding teachers accountable to showing participation.

Activity 2: Assessing Your School’s SEL Programs

It's also important to assess how well-coordinated your school SEL program is. A committee will need to know the needs for improvement and how to make it a better experience for teachers and students.

Activity 3: Assessing Your School’s Culture and Climate

Assessing your school culture and climate is needed because every school is different. These can include surveys, walkthroughs, break out groups, etc.

Activity 4: Articulate Shared Values, Themes and Essential Life Habits

Shared values, life habits are important because schools likely follow mottos and stand for something. School leaders must understand, prioritize, and have the leadership skills to have social and emotional learning in schools.

Activity 5: Providing Consistent and Ongoing Opportunities to Practice SEL Skills

Providing ongoing opportunities for students to practice SEL skills is a necessity because they need to know to solve real-life problems especially under-stress.

Activity 6: Improving Teacher Readiness to Teach SEL

It is important to improve teacher's readiness to support SEL. To be fully effective, the expectation and responsibility should be a priority to support SEL. This requires a deep understanding of students to create and maintain change.

Activity 7: Walk the Walk

The final activity is to have overall communication. Checking in how people are doing and asking questions and working together to create a positive environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think SEL programs should be fully implemented in schools to have students take control and maybe teach teachers about SEL. Having students have a voice in the topic of communicating can dramatically engage students at school and increase their academic success. SEL can also teach students how to properly handle real-life situations. When given the opportunity students have the capacity to teach their teachers important things about who they are, the issues they encounter, and what they need in order to find success. Reflecting back on my story, where I felt missed by my teacher, where teacher empathy was absent, I feel like implementing SEL programs could be the key to restoring authentic student/teacher relationships. That relationship could have an impact on both the teacher and student's life and SEL is only a positive thing. We need to take action to create a new and more socially-just future.

Works-Cited

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