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Social Emotional Learning and Life-Long Success

 Social emotional learning (SEL) is an educational structure that is meant to promote social and emotional development, as inferred by the name. This structure was developed after Daniel Goleman’s publication of *Emotional Intelligence* in 1995 which addressed the need for individuals to understand more than arithmetic and composition, but also their personal strengths, weaknesses, and emotions (Merrell & Gueldner). SEL spans many age groups and adapts itself to any school setting, whether primary, secondary, or post-secondary. Both social and emotional intelligence have been shown to positively affect students’ academic and social successes in present and future experiences (Goleman). Most educators are constantly trying to make their classrooms more engaging to facilitate this development. In order to accomplish the goals of SEL, more strategies to increase student engagement are developing, such as simulations and role-playing games. Social emotional learning has been taught for roughly 20 years and the use of simulations as teaching tools is also a relatively new concept that is growing in popularity. It is important that educators understand what and how SEL is meant to be used, why it is beneficial to their students, and possible lessons that can facilitate social and emotional development as well as student engagement.

As stated above, social and emotional intelligence is essential to present and future academic success. SEL works to unify these two areas with content to present a well-rounded curriculum. As argued by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the most efficient and effective structure of SEL is a “unifying preschool through high school framework of…practices for enhancing the social-emotional-cognitive development and academic performance…” (6). There are other published variations, but this definition and structure is the most recently developed. A successful SEL program is carefully planned, applies learned skills to daily life, includes social aspects, and links the skills to positive academic outcomes (Zins, et al.). In the CASEL’s specific model, SEL is meant to target five competency domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Self-awareness is an individual’s ability to understand their emotions, goals, and personal values (Durlack, et al.). The goal of targeting self-awareness through SEL is to guide students to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. Self-awareness also can enable a student to recognize their potential. An example of self-awareness in a classroom would be a student recognizing they are struggling with a math assignment (Merrel & Gueldner). This skill of recognizing one’s struggles is a skill that can be greatly used after an individual begins their career outside of the educational setting. This long-term influence is the overarching goal of SEL, to better prepare the students involved to be successful in situations they will encounter when joining the work force. In Goleman’s findings, he refers to self-awareness, as well as metacognition and metamood. All three of these terms address one’s ability to analyze themselves and their inner processing, but these types of awareness are meant to be “…nonreactive, nonjudgmental attention to inner states” (47). In order to be seen as competent in this domain, a student must simply show that they recognize when they feel a specific emotion, not judge whether what they are feeling is good or bad. Self-awareness is the first of five domains that SEL targets, but self-management is equally important to a successful program.

Self-management is defined by the CASEL as a student’s ability to regulate the emotions, goals, and values they are aware of. The Collaborative specifically credits this skill for the achievement of personal and educational goals. If a student is unable to control their emotions, they are prone to more delinquent outbursts in class and in their communities (Goleman). A student with self-management may take a deep breath in an effort to calm themselves when feeling overwhelmed by a test or difficult assignment. They are self-aware of the difficulty the test or assignment poses to them and attempt to manage the stress they feel by controlled breathing (Merrel & Gueldner). SEL addresses this skill by providing support through teacher-student relationships. An SEL instructor is meant to be a support to their students beyond the requirements of their content area. While implementing SEL, educators’ main focus is on integrating life skills with their structured content whether they are teaching grammar, arithmetic, or how to manage stress levels in other areas of life (Zins, et al.). This relationship is a very important part of SEL, especially when addressing the competency domain of social awareness.

Social awareness can also be described as empathy. Being socially aware involves the ability to understand alternate perspectives and recognize the effects of those alternate perspective in other lifestyles and culture (Durlack, et al.). Goleman describes the lack of this type of understanding as a “…major deficit in emotional intelligence…” (97). Social awareness is important in SEL instruction because without it students are unable to correctly interpret cues and information around them in their environment. Students who have not developed social awareness are more prone to aggression and are occasionally unable to distinguish between hostile and friendly interactions (Zins, et al.). When using SEL, instructors may combat this issue or deficit by using common daily classroom situations. For example, an educator could teach a lesson on another culture to expand the students’ understanding, or simply expose students to empathy by resolving a disagreement between two students where the students are asked to explain how they feel and why they acted the way they did. This latter option incorporates four of the SEL domains: self-awareness of feelings, self-management of reactions, social awareness of the other student, and the decision to create or not create a relationship with the other individual.

 Developing relationship skills is another aim of SEL. These skills include an individual’s ability to create rewarding relationships, function effectively in group settings, and resist negative peer pressure (Durlack, et al.). These abilities are yet another set of skills that will allow the students influenced by SEL to operate in future career fields in harmony with their coworkers, management, or employees. This aspect of SEL is beneficial to the students who may not be exposed to healthy relationships in their home environment (Zins, et al.). The exposure in an educational environment creates a model for them to observe and imitate healthy relationship skills whether it is with their peers or the educator. An instructor may encourage students to practice their relationship skills in group projects, such as dissecting a plant or creating a large presentation, where it is necessary for them to cooperate with other classmates in order to be successful. In this setting, the SEL instructor is facilitating an activity that teaches content and addresses SEL competency domains.

 The final domain of SEL’s five competencies is referred to as responsible decision making. This final targeted competency combines self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills and uses them to guide the making of responsible decisions. According to Durlack and his co-editors, responsible decision making “…requires the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings” (7). Self-awareness and management allow a student to control their personal behavior. Social awareness and relationship skills allow the student to consider possible social effects of their decisions and consider alternate options. Responsible decision making means the student forms “…a sense of personal, moral, and ethical responsibility” (Merrel & Gueldner, 10). This SEL domain is the last to be addressed because of its dependence on the student’s stage of morality development. According to Lawrence Kohlberg’s developmental theory, the understanding of morality and social responsibility may take until young adulthood to develop (Bohlin, Durwin, & Reese-Weber). This process is ongoing and dependent on environmental factors, but it is still slower to develop than a student’s self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and personal relationships.

 After addressing the five competency domains of SEL, it is important for educators to understand the important role they play in this educational structure. An important requirement is the educator’s attention to the CASEL’s SAFE acronym. SAFE represents the four elements recommended to guide the incorporation of SEL into schools.

*Sequence*: Sequencing is meant for the instructors to coordinate their activities to move with their students through their development (Durlak, et al.). This sequencing will keep the students on track and continue progressing in their development in the five competencies. If an educator does not take the students’ levels of development into account some may lose focus, fall behind, and become disengaged (S. Parsons, Nuland & A. Parsons). By constructing the activities to move with the students they will respond more readily to the material, whether it is relevant to content or SEL.

A*ctive*: Activeforms of learning are meant to be incorporated by the educator to help students master the learned skills (Durlak, et al.). Active learning is not only meant to apply to content, but also the SEL competencies themselves. The instructor must provide students the opportunities to practice their social and emotional skills they are developing within the SEL structure. These skills are meant to be mastered in the same way as any other multiplication fact or grammar lesson.

*Focused*: This element of SEL is meant for an instructor to develop small checkpoints for their intent of a lesson. In *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning*, Elias, Zins and Weissberg pose questions to help educators focus their SEL environment and activities. Some of these questions include:

1. What instructional methods are used to promote SEL?
2. In what ways do you integrate SEL with traditional academics to enhance learning in both areas?
3. What classroom lessons and follow-up reinforcements do you use to improve children’s capacities to express emotions appropriately, make responsible decisions, solve problems effectively, and behave adaptively? (16)

These questions are meant to lead the instructor to think critically about his/her lesson just as any other specific content area preparation.

*Explicit*: When the CASEL refers to the element of explicitness in their structure for SEL, they refer to the “…targeting of specific social and emotional skills” (Durlak, et al., 7). Explicitness can be obtained by focusing on the questions posed in *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning* that were referenced in the previous element.

With the SAFE elemental guides, an educator is able to plan a lesson that will aid his/her students in developing SEL competencies. Another aspect that the instructor must consider outside of planning and preparing materials is creating a relationship or understanding with her students that is beneficial to her planning and students.

 Since the students learn to develop relationship skills through SEL, it is equally important for the students’ authority figures to portray these positive skills. Even if a student does not experience a positive home environment, the educator is expected to portray these positive interactions and skills between individuals. As the instructor develops relationships with their students, they are not only modeling the desirable skills, but also creating a bond that can make the student feel as though they belong. The sense of belonging encourages students to remain engaged at school when struggling (Zins, et al.). SEL is meant to foster the feeling of community and belonging in schools to encourage students to follow the path to become life-long learners (Merrell & Gueldner). Through relationships at school, students are able to depend on the sense of belonging to build confidence and engagement when struggling.

 Student engagement is a very important factor when analyzing successful completion of any program. “Enhancing student engagement at school has emerged as a target variable in school completion efforts” (Zins, et al., 61). Zins and his co-editors address the issue of student disengagement. Student disengagement has the potential to greatly decrease the success of students in the classroom (Alvarez & Frey). For this reason, SEL focuses on teacher-student relationships and application of the learned skills in order to present the material in an engaging way that keeps the student’s attention. Most of the responsibility for keeping students engaged falls to the instructors methods since “…student engagement [and attention] is malleable and dynamic” (S. Parsons, Nuland, & A. Parsons). Methods for keeping attention and engagement include varying instructional methods, using attention signals, and keeping in mind a student’s attentional limits (Bohlin, Durwin, & Reese-Weber). Instructional methods that keep these limits in mind is role-playing and the use of simulations.

 Simulations and role-playing may conjure up an image of two elementary students playing house while playing the roles of parents or siblings, but these role-playing methods are expanding to be used outside of this age group. Activities involving simulations and role-playing can also be referred to as educational play (Nuemann). According to Nuemann, “[p]lay provides the opportunity for activity, for exploration and practice, and for acquiring concrete experiences” (16). This presented opportunity to put learned skills into practice is why SEL is a good fit for educational play. SEL’s five competency domains, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and decision making, are all meant to be incorporated into the learner’s life style and play allows them to practice that real-life incorporation, whether they are in a primary level of education or post-secondary level.

 Some may argue that these games are only effective in young children in their early development, but there are simulations and role-playing games being used to promote learning. In the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* it is plainly stated that the “…SEL framework has not yet been applied to higher education populations and settings…”(Durlack et al., 197). Even though the SEL framework has not been directly applied to post-secondary programs, there are simulations and games created that are aimed to teach skills stemmed from the five SEL competency domains. Games that have been implemented are *Oblivion*, *Reacting to the Past*, or smaller scale simulations that instructors may use as icebreakers in a lesson.

*Oblivion* is a video game that was used to deepen cultural understanding. The study of using *Oblivion* as an educational tool was relatively unexplored until studied by Cindy Anderton and Elizabeth King. The video game was used with counselor education students that were enrolled in master’s-level classes. This game and its emphasis on identity and relevance to social awareness is a common factor with *Reacting to the Past (RTTP)*. *RTTP* is a set of historical role-playing games developed by Mark Carnes (RTTP). The games are developed to be based on student debates and speeches while acting in their historical roles. This game is meant to develop college students’ leadership skills, emotional empathy, and understanding of morality, as well as their speaking and research skills by putting themselves in the role from a different way of life (Carnes). Other smaller simulations could include reenactments of Thanksgiving in elementary classrooms, playing Monopoly in economics, or the recreation of the Underground Railroad from during the Civil War.

These simulations span across a wide range of content areas and targeted skill sets, but each addresses at least one if not more competency domains of SEL. In *Oblivion*, the exposure to another realm where one was expected to function and make moral decisions would help the students adapt to an environment where the culture and rules of society were different from their own. In Anderton and King’s case study, they specifically state that “…the use of video games [is] a tool to enhance self-awareness of biases and stereotypes and fostering empathy and understanding for diverse populations…”(45). All three of these targeted outcomes aim to improved students’ competency in SEL’s social awareness domain. In *RTTP*’s role-playing games, students also develop their competencies in social awareness, as well as relationship skills. Because of *RTTP*’s setting in historical times and characters, the students develop social awareness and the group work required makes them improve their relationship skills in order to be successful. In the smaller scale simulations mentioned, the students take on a new role in the game that is different from the one they have been raised in and taught to function in.

Many of these role-playing set-ups, whether on a computer or in a classroom, require the students to take part in a culture different from their own and this is where most development of SEL competencies takes place. This immersion into another lifestyle requires students to gain or solidify understanding of their emotions, values, and culture in order to take on the second personas, despite if they are historical or fiction-based. In SEL’s five domains there is a skill from each that can be addressed through these educational games. Durlack claims that the SEL framework has not been applied to post-secondary education, but SEL competencies have been addressed in other ways.

Social emotional learning is a relatively new educational framework compared to other methods. With its emphasis on the five competency domains, SEL focuses on the two aspects inferred in its title: social and emotional. This framework is meant to create successful life-long learners that are able to positively function in society. The instructor contributes to SEL in their lesson planning for SEL competencies by following SAFE, giving the students opportunities to practice their learned social and emotional skills, and providing a positive role model of the SEL competencies. In addition to these contributions it is important for the educator to engage the students in their lessons. A possible route to accomplish this is to use occasional simulations or role-playing games to vary their approaches and keep the students’ interests and attention. Overall, SEL works to create a better prepared generation with the help of educators and other developing methods to intrigue student engagement. Social emotional learning is relatively new, but is meant to respond to the demand for better prepared individuals. It addresses important skills as well as content which makes it a valuable asset. SEL is the new path to encouraging successful individuals and life-long learners.

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