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Building PEOPLE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
FOR KIDS, FAMILIES, SCHOOLS & COMMUNITIES

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For centuries, social-emotional learning (SEL) has been woven into the fabric of education. Great minds, from Aristotle to Franklin to King, have defined education as more than facts and figures; it is about the personal development of body, mind, and spirit. When I started my work in education in 1996, educators and community leaders were focused on what was then known as character education and presently would be referred to as SEL. Many education and community leaders were working to make this a focus of our national educational agenda. The federal Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools was fully funded and allocated some dollars to character initiatives. However, at that time, there was not much research around the impact of SEL on students, teachers, and the school community.
From 2003 to 2007, I had the privilege of being part of one of the first federal research projects related to SEL with the U.S. Department of Education, Mathematica, and Vanderbilt University, called the Social and Character Development Research Program (SACD). The work of the organization I founded, including its curriculum, was being evaluated. Our principal investigator, Dr. Leonard Bickman, drew upon the work of Hawkins and Catalano with the Communities That Care model and Bandura’s self-efficacy theory.\(^3\)\(^4\) I have two big takeaways from this five-year project. For any school-wide initiative to be impactful, there must be strong principal leadership. Likewise, effective program implementation requires teacher buy-in, and teacher buy-in is in direct correlation to principal leadership.

Once No Child Left Behind became law in 2002, the emphasis in education became data and evaluation.\(^5\) Coupled with focus on test scores was the reallocation of funding from programs like the state grants provided by Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities to the wars in the Middle East.\(^6\) Data and evaluation are important but only to the degree that they are used in service of the student. Fast forward fifteen years, and we now see the pendulum swinging, hopefully to a place of balance. With the talk about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed practice, we are seeing educators and community leaders wake up to the fact that children are more than numbers. They are people.

It’s an exciting time to be part of education, especially as related to social-emotional learning. There is a growing awareness among global and local leaders that we must attend to the needs of the whole child. Not only do we have superintendents and principals championing the cause, but we also have teachers who are dedicated to what is best for children.

**II. Cost of Maintaining the Status Quo**

A few years ago, when I worked at the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools at Vanderbilt, I heard Tim Shriver speak about his work with the
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). He showed us two images that articulated the way that I have thought about character education and SEL for many years. Every initiative that we undertake at a school—whether it is violence prevention, school-family-community partnerships, substance abuse prevention, health and sex education, academic intervention, or drop-out prevention—is related to SEL. What is needed is a common framework—a common language. The first image below shows all the programs a school may be implementing without any overarching framework; the second image illustrates how all of these initiatives can be organized and made cohesive within the framework of SEL.

What I see as the cost of maintaining the status quo is that we will have a lot of time and money spent on professional development, research, and lip service for SEL without making a measurable change where it matters most—with our kids.

Real change requires a comprehensive overhaul to the way we do school. If we are not careful, we will jump on the bandwagon of SEL and tout our
programs rather than build relationships. Relationships change people, not programs. Building relationships requires time and conversation. In order to connect with one another, we must speak the same language.

III. Forecast for the Future

SEL Strategy
When I look at the future of SEL, I see a need for a universal prevention strategy within individual schools and organizations as well as across the ecosystem of children’s lives. In order for us to make real progress in policy and practice, leaders from all sectors of society must come together and voice the need. Although SEL has been mandated in many states, it has not been funded to the extent necessary to support the work of the teachers, school counselors, and social workers who are working with students day in and day out.

There are caring adults serving our schools and communities who want to be part of positive change for students and provide the first line of defense in order to stop problems before they start. What they need is content for meaningful conversations. Many schools have time allotted for morning meetings or advisory periods, but with the rigors of teaching academics, teachers do not have the time to create SEL lesson plans or coordinate efforts across the school community so that everyone is speaking the same language.

When I’m leading professional development with teachers, I tell them, “Whether you are aware of it or not, you are already teaching SEL. What we want to do is provide a common language for you and your students so you can be more intentional with your SEL practice.” This intentionality causes us to seize the teachable moments that occur as we are walking down the hallway, standing at the water fountain, or outside playing at recess. Additionally, an integration of SEL with academics helps make the academic subject area more relevant and more human. It helps students see how they can use what they’re learning as part of their real world experience.
The focus is on building relationships: teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher. Granting teachers time to focus on relationships will help them and their students thrive because we are creating a place where people are acknowledged and valued for who they are, not just what they do. This sounds simple, but it is not always easy. It means saying hello to people, sharing a smile, noticing when someone has a bad day, and having conversations about difficult things with the goal of coming to greater understanding of one another. With a united focus on universal prevention, resources can be targeted for specific interventions for students dealing with higher levels of trauma.

Evaluation, Data, and Iteration

Part of the work with which I am currently involved is helping schools and youth organizations refine their approaches to SEL evaluation. How do we show that students are learning these SEL competencies—that change is happening and healthy relationships are growing? Additionally, how do we find out where we as caring adults are missing the mark and can improve our approach? We have to include evaluation as part of our SEL work.

The challenge is that SEL can be difficult to measure—that’s what we found with the SACD project. However, we can collect a lot of qualitative data and anecdotal evidence related to impact. In addition to specific SEL measures that are competency focused, we can utilize measures related to school culture and climate. Culture is what we do; climate is how it feels. Long term, we can look at academic, behavioral, and health gains; short term, we can look at engagement. Are the methods we are using to teach SEL meaningful and relevant to kids?

We must pair the qualitative and the quantitative. The data tells us what is working and what is not working. Just because SEL cannot be measured in the same way as mathematics or reading skills does not mean it cannot be measured. It means it is a challenge to measure. This is where both the evaluation and practice of SEL have room to iterate. Again, we must be mindful of our purpose—cultivating relationships and building people.
IV. Pathway to Success

To ensure the success of the SEL movement, educationally sound and commercially viable content and tools are needed.

*Educationally sound*

What we do in the field of SEL must be grounded in research. Both the content and the process need to align with educational theory. Even though SEL itself is difficult to measure, we can provide SEL instruction using proven methods for teaching and learning. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates literacy, arts, and service, as well as conversation, rest, and play, assures that we are meeting the needs of the whole child. The work I do is built on Piaget, Vygotsky, Freire, Bandura, Hawkins, Catalano, and others in the field of education and positive youth development. This approach gives space for student voice, which lets students know that they are valued.

*Commercially viable*

If we are going to obtain and sustain the attention of students in our media-saturated world, we must meet them with content that is attractive and compelling. It must look and feel kid-friendly and fun. Not only must the content look relevant, it must be substantive. Students as young as six years old are capable of having conversations about important issues, such as race and bullying. They have an amazing capacity for understanding the big issues and developing practical solutions for our world. We don't need to talk down to them. Instead, we need to facilitate meaningful conversations, coach them when they are struggling, and learn along with them.

When I was a kid, there were TV shows like *ABC Afterschool Special* during the week and *Schoolhouse Rock* on Saturday mornings. There were kid-friendly PSA announcements running as regular commercials. There was a lot of media attention around positive youth development. I think we've lost that type of TV programming. It's been replaced with popular talk shows and other media, and I believe we are missing a common branding where people
can circle around and say, “This is what we want to promote as becoming a better person,” or “This is what it means to build our community.”

I think there’s an opportunity for those of us in education and other sectors of our society to come together so that we’re meeting kids across the system. Whether that’s school, healthcare, entertainment, or business, it’s a way for us to coalesce. There have been attempts. However, although these initiatives provided a framework for people and a way that they could talk about SEL as adults, they didn’t provide the hands-on activities for kids. I think it’s important to provide practical tools for caring adults. By and large, the people that I talk to say, “Hey, this stuff is really important. I wish I had this when I was a kid. What can I do?” They need a toolbox.

**Changing the Climate**

Many people in our world are living in fear of the next mass shooting or natural disaster. It is our job as educators and community leaders to transform the climate from fear to love. SEL helps us identify what is going on in our heads and in our hearts so we use our hands to build up and not tear down.

There’s a river running through our society that, unfortunately, focuses on the negative and tends to ignore the positive. It’s important to not always focus on the negative but instead turn our attention to the positive and look at the kinds of things kids are doing from a positive youth development standpoint to make a difference in the world. From a theoretical standpoint, it’s positive reinforcement. Let’s look at the good and reinforce that from a positive perspective. If we’re continually putting forward bullying, what are we going to see? More bullying! If we’re putting forward more of the positive, then we’re going to change the social norm. Let’s look at student volunteer hours. Let’s look at their maker projects, including youth entrepreneurship and the arts, and see how kids are contributing. By doing so, we lift everyone up.

When we commit, as both caring adults and youth, to a lifestyle of building up and not tearing down, then we are producing a safe place for everyone to learn and grow. We are providing a place for people to belong. We are creating family.
Editor’s Reflection Questions

• What SEL strategies do you have that are focused on prevention?
  What SEL strategies do you have that are focused on intervention?
  What ties your prevention and intervention efforts together?
• What practical and hands-on tools for caring adults, including teachers, youth leaders, and families, do your SEL efforts have?
• How do you measure culture and climate?

NOTES

1. For more information about Love In A Big World, consult LoveInABigWorld.org. More information about Love In A Big World can also be found by connecting with me on LinkedIn and following @entrprenurgirl and @loveinabigworld on Twitter.
2. The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools is now defunct. For archived information about the program and its efforts, consult www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html.
3. For more information about Communities That Care, consult www.communitiesthatcare.net/about.
5. For more information about No Child Left Behind, consult https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml.
6. The annual funding appropriated for state grants from the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program was reduced by over 100 million dollars between 2003 and 2006. For more information about this program and its funding, consult “Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities: State Grants,” U.S. Department of Education, last modified November 1, 2011, https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dvpformula/index.html.
7. For more information about the Center for Safe and Supportive Schools, consult https://my.vanderbilt.edu/tn-s3-center-vanderbilt/.
8. For more information about the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, consult casel.org.
Building People: Social-Emotional Learning for Kids, Families, Schools & Communities brings together a dozen wide-ranging perspectives on social-emotional learning (SEL) to present a comprehensive picture of the SEL landscape in schools and communities and provide action steps for educators, families, and leaders. This book’s contributors represent a diverse group of nationally and internationally renowned researchers, practitioners, and thought leaders whose collective body of work addresses multiple facets of SEL and its successful implementation in numerous relevant contexts. The content experts featured here are among the leading drivers of SEL’s growth across the global education spectrum, and each has a deep understanding of the practical techniques that can help to overcome the obstacles to addressing kids’ social-emotional needs.

All education stakeholders—from those who work in a school or district to families or other community leaders—will gain a better understanding of SEL and what it looks like in practice through this book. You will discover applicable ways to improve SEL wherever you live and work as the contributors take you through the following discussion points:

- **The Current State of Play**—What is being done locally, regionally, nationally, and globally to address kids’ social-emotional needs? Get a detailed look at how SEL is currently practiced in schools and communities and how perspectives have evolved over time.

- **Cost of Maintaining the Status Quo**—What risks do we face if SEL isn’t prioritized in all learning environments? Gain insight into how kids are harmed when there is no proactive, defined approach to SEL.

- **Forecast for the Future**—How is SEL expected to develop in the next 5–10 years? Learn about the teaching practices and supports coming to the forefront that will help educators, families, and other leaders better meet the needs of kids.

- **Pathway to Success**—What is our way forward? Benefit from effective strategies for making SEL a practical reality in all learning environments.