

Designing & Implementing Social-Emotional Activities in Public Schools

Michael Wallace, WSU Extension

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to 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, 2017). Beyond building and sustaining positive classroom environments, SEL has been associated with a reduction in conduct problems, a reduction in stress caused by educational environments, and improved academic performance (Durlak, 2011).

For all of us, life itself is the context in which social and emotional cues and responses are continuously being discovered, regulated and engaged. The question of “Can we teach SEL out of a book?” isn’t nearly as compelling as “*why would we teach SEL out of a book?*” One need not look far to find both teachable moments through structured or unstructured activities that can be used as direct learning opportunities in the development of social and emotional skills. It is self-evident that we aren’t all learning the same things at the same time or at the same speed, even when grouped in age-conforming cohorts and focused on the same activity. In classroom structures geared for efficiency of time management and impacted by large numbers of students, individualized learning is generally perceived as impractical. Yet, how *present* students are to learning opportunities, individualized or as a class, is measurably impacted by their social emotional dispositions and development. Acknowledging these dispositions and working with (or around) them brings personal engagement into the classroom experience. Immediacy to experience is the sine qua non of finding teachable moments. If we choose to use “real-life” as our shared classroom, we either have to wait for the optimal shared experience to occur, or attempt to create it. Intentionally designing group learning experiences in the service of character development and life skills has been the mission of Extension’s youth development programs for over a century (Wallace, et al. 2014).

What Defines an SEL Group Activity / Experience?

- *Experiential*
Learning from experience could not be more essential in any subject matter than Social Emotional Learning. Learning about the emotion of anger, without being able to recognize it in oneself, or recognize its impacts to others, without being given opportunities to regulate it, would hardly be learning worth mentioning. For young people, becoming aware of and regulating emotional responses is a first-order task. Aggression and lack of impulse control can become paramount barriers to education. At younger ages there is a need for developing empathy and perspective-taking to support the later emergence of formal operational thinking (Piaget, 2011; Gerace, et al. 2015). The advantage of constructed SEL activities is that they generally provide a *mediated context* to practice regulation of emotion, self-efficacy and interpersonal tolerance of differences. The activities can elicit (or be perceived as) personalized, real-life experience, creating more learning value for the participant.
- *A Safe Container*
Because social engagement is a factor in determining how emotions are regulated, an SEL experience needs to be delivered within a group and (ideally) in a setting that provides physical and emotional safety. If one is going to explore an emotion, or a cultural value, one would want to know that the people one is sharing with can respect and be supportive of differences when they arise. The term “safe container” refers to the group facilitators and members of the group holding respectful agreements so that all members in the group feel safe enough to take risks in expressing themselves and growing.
- *Responsive & Reflective*
The most critical of steps in experiential learning, and often the least implemented, is reflection. To have a potentially meaningful SEL experience and then not reflect upon it, dismisses the opportunity for meaningful learning to take place. Likewise, to “conclude” an activity with a moral lesson that “should have been learned” is not nearly as salient to learners as helping them acknowledge what the experience is doing *within* them. For younger learners, with less life experience to draw on, there may be less familiarity with what they are experiencing, which is why it is all the more important that they learn to acknowledge feelings through firsthand experience and facilitated reflection.

Generally, the experiential process begins with creating the safe container, then having group experiences, and then reflecting as a group. Being intentional in designing SEL activities is “approximating” the target outcome, but shifting to acknowledge when participants have different meaningful experiences than the ones we had hoped for in our design. The reflection process cannot be rushed if the intention is to value the learner’s experience. SEL activities are learner-centered: they should elicit responses and then follow cues from students about *what they* are experiencing.

As youth age, one goal can be to replace intentionally designed experiential activities with real life experiences. As the immediacy of their experience is replaced with learned memory, real life experience and personal narrative, youth will be more and more capable of identifying and communicating their social/emotional perspectives and value structures. For younger children, the intentional activities that elicit SEL opportunities can vary widely in modality: arts, sports, current events, conflicts, celebrations. The debriefing of experiential activities can follow any of a number of strategies. With younger participants, being consistent with a debrief structure such as a Council Circle (see below), gives them the assurance that there will be a predictable moment to consider, share and process what they are experiencing. Group debriefing also makes us much more aware that others engage and experience reality in vastly different ways.

Challenges of SEL in Public Schools

Key challenges in creating effective SEL environments in public schools include recognizing the non-linear developmental continuum of SEL and the limitations of the child’s development, the “real” vs. the “pre-packaged” transmission of social-emotional values and messages, which includes challenges associated with delivering culturally responsive and respectful education; and given its importance, determining SEL’s place and predominance in the educational institution (SELBW, OSPI 2016).

The expression “we are the curriculum” is not metaphorical. It applies to all of us: teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members. As we learn more about trauma-informed teaching, and recognize our own human limitations in dealing with trauma, the non-linear developmental continuum of social and emotional skills becomes obvious. Consider these questions:

Have you ever had people tell you (perhaps over the course of several years) about a part of your character that you did not or could not acknowledge until some pivotal experience made it visible to you? When you felt you finally had the emotional capacity to acknowledge this previously invisible part of yourself, what happened? Why hadn’t it happened before? Have you ever met someone you felt was “not acting their age?”

The assessment of SEL is controversial because it implies we can all develop social emotional skills in a linear way. Even the learning of social-emotional “skill sets” would be affected by our *readiness (self-awareness)* and the utilitarian service we believe having those skills will provide to our sense of well-being (i.e.: *relevance*). Young children, in particular, have less long term memory and fewer life experiences to draw on for reflection, so their learning experiences are beneficial when they are immediate and focused on the the development of social-emotional self-awareness and coping skills. Still, they will only be drawn to develop *what they believe they need at the time*. Educators should be cautioned against prescriptive or therapeutic intervention.

Social and emotional expressions are (for better or worse) a part of our cultural conditioning. Particularly in situations of conflict: direct vs. indirect approaches and emotionally expressive vs. emotionally restrained approaches, are variables that research has demonstrated are embedded *culturally* (Hammer, 2011). The stakeholders of the Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks group commissioned by OSPI and the Washington Legislature said very clearly that “if not carefully crafted and vetted, SEL standards and benchmarks could inadvertently elevate one set of cultural norms above others.” (SELBW, OSPI 2016) Proposing a “culturally responsive” social emotional curriculum that can respectfully prescribe the appropriate use of emotions across cultural contexts seems premature, particularly in a heterogeneous mixture of cultures such as one finds in America. How can we assume to assess an emotion, or a culture, we are not a part of? Additionally, taking into account our collective non-linear social-emotional development, positioning an individual or external curriculum as an “external authority” on “correct” social-emotional responses and values comes with inherent limitations. In SEL we *are* the curriculum, we are *all* students, we are *all* participants. We are dispersed upon a continuum that requires the greatest sensitivity and respect to one another.

Once the superintendent has staked out a series of learning objectives and benchmarks, and a school has determined that social emotional learning is a needed ingredient for student success, the administration and staff begin the arduous task of attempting to carve out time for it. *Time* is the cost of effective education. Too many objectives diminish the strength of outcomes. The culture of ***institutional time*** is a part of what we must be willing to call into the circle. Institutional time, in its powerful adherence to efficiency and outcomes, seldom allows time for its “parts” to step out of their functionary roles to acknowledge their uniqueness and humanity. SEL requires that recognition. In this culture the time manager is promoted over the health of the system because humans are messy and inefficient and they need to be managed better. Managers succeed because they place institutional priorities above human priorities. Being effective educators of an SEL practice begins with recognizing that we are embedded in an institutional culture of limitation right along with our students. A SEL “safe container” is one that allows us to value one another with true equality, and that means occasionally modeling human objectives over institutional ones. It’s about taking the time to be human.

Determining Readiness

SEL environments should help youth with exercising self-regulation, increasing their implementation of flexible and situationally relevant self-care and their ability to demonstrate increasingly pro-social behavior. The advancement of SEL has been justified by virtue of its effects on academic performance, (Zins et al. 2004) but the presence of successful SEL opportunities in schools might depend more directly on each school’s *readiness* to pursue the SEL objectives.

Does the school:

- have an administration that shows support for SEL programming, both with time and resources?
- have a professional development strategy that supports staff in SEL objectives personally and professionally?
- have a schedule that provides flexible, direct and indirect time to pursue SEL learning objectives when appropriate?
- have teachers who believe in the ethical importance of providing unbiased SEL to youth?
- have staff and community resources to address children dealing with trauma?
- have parents, families and community members who share in a vision for socially-emotionally competent youth?

There are several school climate assessments available. The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey has several components designed to measure school climate, although it does not measure teacher or parent input, which is going to figure heavily in the success of such a program. (Haggerty, et al. 2011). The OSPI workgroup related research that indicates the most successful SEL programs are operating at the *classroom level* and have expectations integrated throughout the school community (SELBW/OSPI, 2016).

Council Circles

Our aboriginal ancestors and tribal communities the world over have utilized Council as a structure for community and governance as long as there have been written records, and since these models come from predominantly oral traditions, we can assume the act of Council dates much further back than written record. Council Circles offer an exceptional opportunity to develop social emotional skills through collective reflection on communal experiences. The structure of a council circle has remained fairly consistent over the centuries, it is simple and easy to implement. A group gathers, they sit in a circle to discuss an important topic or to make a decision. A “talking piece” is passed clockwise around the circle to indicate who is speaking. When someone holds the talking piece they speak concisely “from the heart” while all the other members listen as intently as they can. There are no interruptions. The talking piece travels the circle giving each member an equal opportunity to speak and be heard. A facilitator is charged with maintaining the boundaries of the circle to protect the process (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).

The educational appeal of Council has a long history of resurfacing in educational practices. Councils require participants develop skills such as self-awareness, self-control, perseverance, awareness of others, listening and empathy, clear thinking and goal directed effort and very importantly, a respect for differences. Councils teach participants the value of social belonging and encourage sound judgement and good decision-making. *These are essentially the same goals desired from Social Emotional Learning objectives.* These qualities predict academic, economic, social, psychological and physical well-being. (Almlund et al., 2011; Allensworth et al., 2012)

The Council Circle provides a structure for reflection, a safe predictable container, through which participants can support one another as they develop themselves as social-emotional beings. In early grades, teachers can hold council after particularly meaningful, intentional or unexpected experiences in order to help youth acknowledge and process social and emotional learning. The benefits of using a council circle to develop social emotional learning are:

- 1) It can be incredibly cost effective. It does not require the use of a prescribed curriculum that may or may not address target issues
- 2) It builds on young people's (and educators) immediate experiences, emotions and perceptions. (It respects that social emotional development is non-linear.)
- 3) Provided the circle facilitator is ethical and supportive of all, a circle is inherently inclusive of all cultures and beliefs represented. Circles are holistic and communicate communal belonging
- 4) Circles readily transfer to peripheral groups and events once the structure is adopted: teachers, parents and other community groups can easily incorporate the process as a means to build community and make decisions

Embedding intentional SEL activities in classrooms presents a challenge to "business as usual" in the traditional educational systems model. It is a true step away from bureaucratic management and into constructivism (Shapiro,2000). As participants in these models, we may be called upon to recognize how our institutional systems are *constructing us*, and requiring behaviors counter to our values as educators. Is our culture merely a culture of obsessive evaluation? Is that a healthy environment for children or the people who care for them? Some would argue that our cultures, our feelings, our spirit, should be respected as the *compass* of our endeavor, and not an objectified subject matter that needs to be evaluated so much as re-valued.

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