The Links Between Social and Emotional Learning and Literacy

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The field of education has gained a growing appreciation of the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) on the academic lives of students. After all, learning is social (Vygotsky, 1978). Students and teachers are humans in the company of other humans, and the interactions they have with each other can fuel or inhibit. Bandura (1977) taught us that one’s internal emotional life has a profound influence on our sense of agency and identity, which he termed self-efficacy. SEL, which emphasizes skills related to collaboration and self-efficacy, as well as self-regulation, goal setting, and communication, have evolved since early efforts in character education and other values-directed approaches.

Increasingly, SEL initiatives are implemented schoolwide and woven into the academic curriculum. We have Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011), in part, to thank for that. Their 2011 meta-analysis captured the collective impact of 213 studies involving a total of 270,000 students across grades K–12. (A meta-analysis is a statistical method used to calculate the effect size of many studies and report it as a single measure of magnitude.) Durlak and colleagues demonstrated how SEL efforts positively impact social skills, as well as academic and behavioral outcomes, in material ways. In addition, the study reported large effect sizes (0.57) on the internal skills and dispositions of students. Those who had participated in SEL initiatives were more able to identify their emotions, set goals, self-regulate, solve problems, resolve conflicts, and make sound decisions.

In this column, we examine research on the influence of elements of SEL on the literacy learning of adolescents and young adults. The first study we profile summarizes more recent meta-analyses that have occurred since the one in 2011. The second highlights the intersection between SEL and the digital literacy skills of middle school students. The third study describes the development of an instrument for assessing facets of SEL that influence the writing achievement of struggling college students.

The Link Between SEL and Student Outcomes: Mahoney, Durlak, and Weissberg (2018)

Since Durlak et al.’s (2011) original meta-analysis on SEL initiatives, interest in SEL as an integrative approach has grown in the educational field. Mahoney and colleagues (2018) published an informative summary in 2018 spotlighting three current meta-analyses on the subject published since 2012, and which focus on postintervention outcomes and long-term effects. The meta-analyses on academic achievement are the most striking: “an 11 percentile-point gain in achievement, over the long term, for students who participated in SEL programs relative to those who did not” (p. 22). The 356 separate studies represented in these meta-analyses involved students from kindergarten through 12th grade, internationally and in the United States. Although the goal of these studies was not to examine why various factors improve academic outcomes, educators can quickly formulate the possible reasons. Schoolwide SEL initiatives led to improved attitudes and dispositions toward school, more positive social relationships, and decreases in conduct problems and emotional distress. The overall impact appears to be an increase in the emotional and psychological bandwidth that students are able to dedicate to learning.

The Link Between SEL and Digital Literacy: Porat, Blau, and Barak (2018)

Classroom teachers have witnessed this before: students whose self-assessment of skills is far removed from actual performance. This is especially true in digital literacy, an arena that adolescents rate themselves as possessing a high level of proficiency. They sometimes narrowly interpret digital literacy as a measure of their technical skill, without attention to the accompanying cognitive, emotional, and social regulation demands of online environments. Porat and colleagues (2018), who are digital literacy researchers in Israel, examined the relation between the performance measures of 238 seventh-grade
students on a variety of digital literacy tasks and the students' self-reported ratings of their competency and proficiency. Using Eshet-Alkalai’s (2012) framework of digital literacy, Porat et al. assessed across six dimensions:

1. **Photovisual literacy:** Use and interpretation of visual information
2. **Reproduction literacy:** Use of online sources to write an original text
3. **Branching literacy:** Ability to assemble information from multiple sources
4. **Information literacy:** Ability to find credible sources on the internet
5. **Real-time thinking literacy:** Ability to ignore pop-up ads and other distractions
6. **Socioemotional literacy:** Use of ethical decision making, respectful communication, and projection of a suitable online presence

The last dimension encapsulates many of the concerns that literacy educators hold for young people in digital environments. The ubiquitous presence of social media in the lives of adolescents, coupled with low cognitive and emotional regulation, puts them at risk for disclosing private information, cyberbullying, and spreading inaccurate or harmful information, to name just a few threats.

The tasks for assessment of the SEL dimension in this study were a discussion board on internet safety and a self-evaluation instrument. Here’s where the findings were especially profound. The researchers discovered that although there were wide gaps between evidence of skills and self-reported data in all dimensions of digital literacy, the widest was in socioemotional literacy. On a 5-point scale, mean student performance was 0.89, the lowest of all six dimensions. However, students rated their SEL literacy skills at the highest level of all six factors, a significant overestimation compared with their performance. Self-perceived competency in the realm of SEL, coupled with their dismal performance, presents a dangerous lack of perception that prevents students from developing what the researchers called digital wisdom.

**The Link Between SEL and Writing: MacArthur, Philippakos, and Graham (2016)**

Conventional writing instruction typically focuses on skills and related cognitive strategies. The aim of the teaching is therefore primarily to address issues of mechanics, conventions, organization, form, and format. Further instructional attention is dedicated to elements of the writing process, such as planning, editing, and revising. Yet, factors of SEL strongly influence the writing motivation of students and can be difficult to alter without careful attention. In turn, our own lack of perception about a student’s motivation, self-efficacy, goal orientation, and overall beliefs about writing make it difficult to address these factors. Instead, we risk making judgments based on outward behavior, and perhaps even personal character, and are flummoxed when writing achievement doesn’t change. Although there is evidence of a strong relation between writing motivation and writing achievement (e.g., Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007), less attention has been dedicated to these underlying constructs that drive students to write (or deter them).

MacArthur and colleagues (2016) sought to develop a measure of writing motivation for use with older students. The researchers identified college students enrolled in first-year developmental writing courses. Although numbers shifted somewhat due to reporting variances, it was estimated that 40% of incoming college freshmen take at least one remedial course in reading, writing, or mathematics. According to Mejia, Rodriguez, and Johnson (2016), this can be as high as 80% among students attending community colleges. Citing published research by Cox (2009), MacArthur et al. reported on the nonproductive ways that students who were enrolled in remedial composition classes dealt with unspoken fears of failure, including withdrawing from a course, not participating in class discussions, and failing to submit written assignments. “For low-achieving college writers,” MacArthur et al. stated, “improved motivation may be a critical outcome, as important as gains in quality of writing” (p. 32).

Using the amassed research on motivation in writing, MacArthur and colleagues (2016) developed and validated an instrument to gauge writing motivation before and after instruction. The 18-item questionnaire scales across four constructs:

1. **Self-efficacy for writing** (e.g., “I can find the right words to express my ideas”; p. 37)
2. **Beliefs about writing** (e.g., “Writing helps me think about my topic in a new way”; p. 37)
3. **Affect about writing** (e.g., “I usually enjoy writing”; p. 37)
4. **Goal orientation toward writing** (“When I’m writing in this class, I’m trying to...”; p. 37)

The last factor was arguably the most revealing, as it unearthed students’ avoidance, performance, and mastery goal orientations. Students motivated by avoidance goals select answers to the fourth prompt above such as
“...hide that I have a hard time writing” or “...avoid making mistakes in front of my classmates.” Those driven by performance goals are motivated primarily by grades and choose items such as “...pass this class” and “...get a good grade in the class.” A third goal orientation is one of mastery, as these students seek to learn how to compose more effectively. They select answers such as “...become a better writer” and “...improve how I express my ideas.” MacArthur and colleagues (2016) found that mastery goal orientation positively correlated with writing achievement and self-efficacy, whereas avoidance goal orientation was predictive of lower writing achievement. Importantly, the instrument was sensitive to instruction. Students took the questionnaire at the beginning and end of the course, and their scores changed as a result of the instruction. The course curriculum for the remedial writing course in which participants were enrolled centered on self-regulated strategy development, an approach to writing developed by Graham and Harris (2005). Self-regulated strategy development uses explicit teaching of writing strategies through discussion, modeling of thinking practices, memorization of actions, and collaborative, small-group support with peers and the teacher. MacArthur et al. (2016) noted that these remedial writers shifted to a mastery goal orientation and that “their beliefs moved from an emphasis on conventions to a greater emphasis on the content of writing” (p. 41).

Conclusion

Many educators recognize that SEL is crucial for excelling in school and in life. Mounting evidence suggests that strong SEL skills amplify academic learning. Rather than being relegated to the sidelines, research evidence suggests that SEL skills should be infused into core curriculum. Perhaps nowhere are the positive effects of SEL being witnessed more than in literacy. Students who learn to produce, who consider the perspectives of others, and express themselves in ways that are humane and growth producing, who consider the perspectives of others, and who can listen empathically will learn more and will likely have a positive impact on the world around them. The adults who teach students, and the institutions they function within, can either support or undercut students’ social and emotional well-being. Mounting evidence suggests that attention to this aspect of learning is crucial.

REFERENCES


