

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING: SHORT ACTIVITIES, BIG IMPACT

Dr. Arren Swift
Social Studies Educator
arren.swift@cowetaschools.net

Dr. Amber J. Godwin
Assistant Professor
School of Teaching & Learning
College of Education
Sam Houston State University
1908 Bobby K Marks, Office 244
Huntsville, TX 77341-2119
Office: 936-294-1167
agodwin@shsu.edu

Abstract

This manuscript identifies the importance of social-emotional learning to build a positive classroom environment. The need to enact a method that is effective but also time-sensitive is examined. The benefits of enacting activities to improve social-emotional learning that can be conducted in a short amount of class time are discussed.

Keywords: Social-emotional learning; skill development; classroom management; community building

Background

The Covid-19 crisis has re-centered the idea that teachers of record need to not only create meaningful, content-based lessons (Swift, & Godwin, 2021) but also address student emotional needs. There is an increase in open dialogue beginning with educators concerned for how to best teach students especially after acknowledging that both students and their teachers have experienced trauma (Zimmerman, 2018). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies provide that bridge between content-based classroom activities and the emotional needs that students bring to the classroom with them, intertwining these two can help students develop positive behaviors that can benefit both themselves and their communities (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). This work is innovative in that we suggest weaving SEL activities into the classroom has the potential not only to support a classroom climate of student well-being (Atkinson, 2013; Hawk, 2017; Sointu, 2005), it can also provide avenues for positive relationships and skill building that can extend far beyond a classroom.

What is Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is 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 (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2006). Social-emotional learning includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others (Elias, 1997). Social-emotional learning refers specifically to student development in beliefs, dispositions, attitudes, skills, and behaviors to individuals and society (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

Why Enact Social-Emotional Learning

For the past decade, a growing number of educators have called for greater attention to aspects of student development, such as students' mindsets, beliefs, dispositions, emotions, and behaviors (Allbright, Marsh, Kennedy, Hough, & McKibben, 2019). Interests in advancing these aspects of social-emotional learning are gaining momentum among teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers across the United States (Allbright, Marsh, Kennedy, Hough, & McKibben, 2019). Studies have demonstrated that embedding high-quality SEL programs, curricula, and activities into a school may improve academic performance, attendance, behaviors, culture, and climate (Berkowitz, et al., 2017).

This manuscript will explore two educator's journeys to incorporate SEL activities into their classrooms. Although one educator will describe enacting SEL at a high school setting and another educator will be situating SEL into a collegiate classroom, both educators worked with adolescents (Arnett, 1994). These experiences illustrate the way that SEL activities can impact adolescents in two distinct academic environments.

Educator 1

Dr. Schellhause's High School Classroom

It was the month of April when my student approached me with a box of wristbands. I asked why she was selling them and learned her father had been diagnosed with cancer two months prior and she was attempting to raise money for his treatment. My heart broke for my student and the difficulty her family faced. I was discouraged by my ability as a teacher to identify her needs and provide support. This motivated me to take action. My first attempt to identify the social and emotional needs of my students came in the form of a poster. I wrote "What can I help you with?" at the top of the poster and taped it to the wall in my classroom. The students were inquisitive and some wrote legitimate concerns on the poster. Within a week the

poster was littered with unrealistic requests such as winning lottery numbers, profanity, or issues of concern unaccompanied by a name. The poster idea failed.

I addressed each class the next day for the first several minutes of class. I voiced my displeasure in the ineffectiveness of the poster. I relayed my goal and disappointed in my ability to develop something that would be beneficial to the students. Inadvertently, my discussion with the class was more powerful than I could have perceived. The students voiced their appreciation for my dedication to the development of something that would have a positive impact. Some students suggested alternative ideas that would lead to a better understanding of what each student faced. The reality was that the discussion that was conducted in the first few moments of class with purpose and direction was the powerful item I sought. I didn't realize this at the time and for the last few weeks that remained that school year my investigation faded as I was so focused on standards-based learning I forgot I was not only teaching to help my students be successful on an exam, I was also teaching to help them be successful at life.

That summer my district provided training on community building. The focus of the session was finding a way to enhance building relationships, which is a cornerstone of supporting student social and emotional health (Khazanchi, et al., 2021). I knew I had to find a way to do it. I recognized I would have to adjust the time that would be spent on teaching social-emotional learning but what I appreciated was the encouragement to enact social-emotional skill building during our classes. Over the remaining weeks that summer I crafted questions I believed would solicit responses from students that would help me understand their mental state, especially knowing how important dialogues are to developing healthy interpersonal communication skills (Heniksen, & Shack, 2020; Johnson, 2019). I began to investigate social-emotional learning more deeply and began to alter what I developed to become more purposeful.

How I implemented social-emotional learning in my classroom was vital to the success of the intervention (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2005). My goal was to develop an activity that could be conducted in five to ten minutes once a week that would lead to a more inclusive and informed classroom. I wanted all of my students to feel valued and appreciated through their experiences in my class.

Once I enacted the practice, which I called Mental Health Monday, I found that my students loved it. I selected Monday because it is the first day of the week and believed it would be a positive way to set the tone. Each activity took five to ten minutes of class time. I found the activities to have an immediate value without detracting from my ability to cover content. I was able to learn more about each of my students and I became more prepared to anticipate their needs.

Creation of Activities

Before developing tasks to enact in my classroom I researched effective SEL strategies. I reviewed the framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2006) and was encouraged by the evidence that supported effectiveness in improving social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The framework focuses on individual skill development in five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Dobia, Parada, Roffey, & Smith, 2019).

To develop a curriculum that would improve my classroom culture and help find a way to get to know my students better I followed the instructional guide of the CASEL. CASEL (2015), recommends constructing SEL instruction through skill development, the use of active learning, to focus on improving personal and social skills, and the work should explicitly target social and

emotional skills. Each task I developed featured an activity that would build an understanding of one of the core competencies.

The SEL bell ringer activities had to be built with a focus on individual skill development in a social setting and they had to be accomplished in a short amount of time. Despite my desperate need for the integration of a curriculum that would improve the social and emotional health of my students, I was also focused on covering the curriculum standards of the class.

I was determined to develop activities that could be conducted in five to ten minutes and enacted once a week. Jones and colleagues (2017) claimed that targeted strategies, that can be taught quickly may be more feasible for schools to implement and sustain. I confirmed their research as I was able to maintain the use of the strategies since development.

As I enacted the lessons I shared my findings with colleagues and exchanged ideas. It is valuable for teachers who aim to improve students' academic performance, to consult in a collaborative effort to determine meaningful curriculum improvement (Swift, 2020). The ability to consider alternative perspectives and receive feedback enhanced the quality of activities produced. Through the dialogue, it encouraged both practitioners of social-emotional learning to continue the enactment of short activities in our classes.

Mental Health Monday Lesson Plan

Materials needed: You will need five sheets of poster paper, one marker for each student, and tape.

Setup: Tape the five sheets of poster paper to your classroom walls, space the posters apart as much as possible. On each poster write the titles Home, Work, School, This Class, Sports/Clubs and number each poster one through five. Have the markers easily accessible for your students.

Directions:

Step 1: As the students enter the classroom number them one to five.

Step 2: Instruct the students to take a marker and report to the poster that corresponds to the number they were given.

Step 3: Instruct the students to write the first word that comes to mind when they read the title of that poster.

Step 4: Have the students share with the students in their group why that word came to mind and what feelings led them to select that word.

Step 5: Provide each of the students in the group an opportunity to share their thoughts. The time required will depend on how much your students are willing to share and how many students you have in your class.

Step 6: Ask the students to move clockwise to the next poster and repeat the process. Try to limit each group to three minutes on each poster. Each group should visit three posters.

Step 7: After the students have graffitied three different posters ask them to return to their seats.

Step 8: Ask the students to look at the words written on each poster.

Step 9: Ask the students the following questions: Were there any similarities? Why? Do any words stand out? Which ones? Why? Why do you think some of us might feel like this? What can I do to help increase the positive items identified? What can I do to improve the negative items identified?

Insights for the teacher: As the students are writing words on the wall this is a good opportunity for you to observe what specific students are writing. The activity provides a sense of safety for the students to communicate knowing there is some element of anonymity. I try

to take attendance at this time and stay at my computer while scanning the room to see what students are writing and telling their peers.

Educator 2

Dr. Watson's University Classroom

I used a similar strategy to keep students feeling supported both academically and emotionally through personal semester check-ins. This method was conducted twice a semester via Google forms but I encourage you to use whichever online forum you feel the most comfortable. Some platforms I have used in the past include-Google forms, Blackboard, Canvas, class announcements, or personal emails. You should formulate the communication to fit your needs and the needs of your students so that you are checking in with them purposefully in a way that is both personal to the student (Dobia, et. al, 2019) but also professional.

Remember that as your students respond to this check-in they may have varying forms of responses. Some students may respond to your questions with thorough, in-depth responses and others may be vague and reserved. That's ok! This is about providing an opportunity for students to check in with you and you to respond to them in a way that is supportive and professional, this is a way for you to give all students an opportunity to have that little bit of extra attention that they may need.

Here is a suggested wording:

“It's time for our first check-in! Please answer the following questions by (responding to this email/submitting this form/completing the check-in assignment/etc). Questions:

1. How are YOU doing?
2. How are YOUR CLASSES going?

3. How do you feel you are doing in THIS CLASS?
4. What concerns do you have that I can HELP you with?

Findings

Over the first semester, Dr. Schellhause enacted Mental Health Monday activities, like the one described above. He self-reported, “I learned more about each of my students than what I had been able to ascertain over a student’s entire high school experience. The shy student in the back of the room became more engaged with his peers.”

In a similar vein, when Dr. Watson enacted the twice-a-semester check-ins it resulted in a special sort of cohesion to the class in that students knew that they had an opportunity to ask questions outside of the classroom or express concerns in a way that made them know someone was listening. She self-reported, “I was able to answer questions about anything from career ideas to what kind of books I would recommend they read for summer vacation. I was also able to direct students to places that could help (i.e. counselors, school nurse, school psychologist) if they needed additional help and support.”

Conclusion

These activities helped build a community of trust and support. Mental Health Monday sparked discussions and some students cultivated new friendships while enacting a social-emotional learning experience that helped cultivate a caring classroom community. The students shared a common purpose (Allen, 2021, & National Society of High School Scholars, 2021) and it showed.

The benefits of the activities are infused with the educational goals of the class. In both of these activities, we were able to identify students who were dealing with difficult issues and offer support. Our students were more willing to volunteer answers even when they were unsure if

they were correct. The culture of the classes enhanced collaborative learning opportunities. Our students were working more diligently on the assigned tasks than they were before enacting the social-emotional learning activities. Their increased focus to remain on task helped us cover the same amount of material we were covering before enacting SEL activities.

We believe the activities had a positive impact on our students and their well-being (Atkinson, 2013; Hawk, 2017; Sointu, 2005). As we discussed issues commonalities surfaced, including trauma (Zimmerman, 2018) this helped the students identify with each other. We saw our classes become more cohesive and it benefited the project-based learning tasks we enacted in our classrooms. We sensed a more positive feeling among the students (Khazanchi, et al., 2021), which made working with them more enjoyable. The students became more willing to share personal information. This helped us identify students who needed extra support, find avenues to provide that support, and create a more positive and productive classroom.

The activities we used to improve SEL in our classrooms were not a cure all, but they were short activities (Jones et al., 2017) with a big impact. Still, some of our students did not enjoy participating and some refused so we had to work beyond the activities to continue working to build positive relationships with our students. This reinforced the idea that culture and climate that you establish in a classroom goes beyond one activity, our ethic of care expanded into the way we acted and treated people throughout the day and school year. Knowing our students became a part of our continuing professional development throughout the year (Hawk, 2017) and it is our hope that the lessons the students learned about self-care through these experiences continue to serve them long after our time with them is over.

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