

Eye  Research

Social-Skills Programs Found to Yield Gains in Academic Subjects

By Debra Viadero

New York

A forthcoming research review offers some counterintuitive advice for educators: Take time out of the curriculum to teach students to manage their emotions and to practice empathy, caring, and cooperation—and their academic achievement could improve in the bargain.

The new findings, discussed last week at a national forum here on social and emotional learning, are based on a not-yet-published analysis of 207 studies of school-based programs designed to foster children's social and emotional skills.

"In the past, when people would say, 'You're taking away from academic time for these programs,' we would say, 'Well, it's not going to hurt learning,'" said Roger P. Weissberg, the president of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, the Chicago-based group that sponsored the four-year study. "What we find now is that when you have these programs, academics improve."

The results come at what some see as a critical juncture in the movement to promote social and emotional learning. Research findings in education and other fields, such as brain science, seem to be converging on the benefits of such instruction, and programs based on the concept have a small but growing presence in schools.

One state, Illinois, has set down standards for teaching the subject. Another, New York, is developing voluntary guidelines for teaching students social and emotional skills. Lessons in social and emotional learning are also taught in some districts, from New Haven, Conn., to Anchorage, Alaska.

Some advocates of social and emotional learning contend that one roadblock to more widespread implementation of their programs is the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which has put new pressure on schools to raise test scores in core subjects and narrowed the curricular focus in some schools.

But the nearly 6-year-old law also calls on educators to employ "scientifically based" educational practices, and leaders of the movement for social and emotional learning hope the new findings will give their programs a more solid footing in schools nationwide.

"This research confirms what a lot of us have been saying for years," said Dr. James P. Comer, the Yale University psychologist best known for developing the Comer School Development Project, a model for improving the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of urban schoolchildren. "It's almost counterintuitive for some people to believe that it's about how you treat kids."

207 Studies Analyzed

For their analysis, the CASEL researchers sifted through 700 studies on a broad range of school-based programs aimed at honing students' social and emotional skills. Such programs might include, for instance, character education lessons, anti-bullying efforts, drug-abuse-prevention programs, or conflict-resolution training.

Out of that hodgepodge, the researchers culled 207 studies that met their criteria for inclusion in the analysis. The studies had to involve typical students ages 5 to 18, and use a control group of students, so that any gains could be compared against those that students might be expected to make under normal circumstances.

Just under half the studies also went a step further and randomly assigned students to either the experimental or the comparison group.

Strong Effects Found

Across the board, the researchers found, the programs did what they were supposed to do: After the lessons, the students in the experimental groups were better behaved, more positive, and less anxious than their control-group peers. The program students had also, apparently, gotten smarter, as measured by their grades and test scores.

As a group, those students scored 11 percentile points higher than the comparison-group students on a measure known as an "improvement index." The term, borrowed from federal education researchers, refers to the difference between the mean percentile rank for the intervention group and that of the control group.

"The impact here is almost twice that of studies on class-size improvements," said Mr. Weissberg, who is also a professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He was a co-author of the report with Joseph A. Durlak, a Loyola University of Chicago psychologist, and other researchers.

CASEL is scheduled to publish the report in early 2008. Mr. Weissberg shared the findings at the Dec. 10 meeting in New York, which was aimed at charting a future course for the 13-year-old organization and the movement it helps promote.

"When kids are disaffected or they're not motivated and engaged, improving academic test scores is a real challenge," Mr. Weissberg added, "and that can't be done unless you address students' social, emotional, and cognitive needs."

Some Skeptical

The analysis also showed that the good effects persisted six months or more after students took part in the programs, although to a lesser degree. And the lessons were even more effective when they were provided by teachers, rather than the program developers or researchers, Mr. Weissberg said.

Some experts, however, continue to caution that such findings should be viewed with a dose of skepticism since they have yet to be published in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

"I have always been a bit skeptical of in-house studies, because it's often the case that the people who do the evaluations have a stake in the outcome turning out a certain way," said Kevin R. Murphy, a professor of psychology, information sciences, and technology at Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pa.

A critic of the theory of "emotional intelligence," Mr. Murphy was not part of the CASEL meeting. "That's not to say these programs can't work," he added. "But this is an area where the claims often run ahead of the evidence."

But Richard J. Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, noted that the findings dovetail with his own work on emotion and the brain's structure and function. While studies have long shown that negative emotions, such as anxiety and fear, can interfere with learning, Mr. Davidson, who was named one of the world's most influential people by Time magazine in 2006, has documented that in people who undergo regular training in meditation or other practices akin to social and emotional learning, the brain circuitry actually changes.

"Social and emotional learning likely produces beneficial changes in the brain," Mr. Davidson told conference-goers here.

Though research is needed to better document the mechanics of such transformations, he said, "qualities such as patience, calmness, cooperation, and kindness should really now best be regarded as skills that can be trained."

"Not an Easy Sell"

Policymakers and educators at the K-12 level, though, can be reluctant to incorporate such teachings into the curriculum, said Carol S. Comeau, the superintendent of schools in Anchorage. Lessons in social and emotional learning have been part of the regular instructional program across that 48,500-student district since 2004.

"It was not an easy sell," Ms. Comeau said. "Some members of our school board thought it was really about self-esteem and helping kids feel good about themselves."

Test scores have risen districtwide since the changes have been incorporated. And now an ongoing study by the Washington-based American Institutes for Research suggests that some of that improvement could be due to the lessons.

Since 2005, David Osher, the lead researcher on the AIR study, has surveyed staff members and students across the district in grades 5-12 on measures of school climate—factors, in other words, such as the extent to which students feel safe and cared for in schools, whether parents are involved in schools, and the pervasiveness of student drug and alcohol use.

"When the school climate and school connections measures go up," Mr. Osher said, he has found that "students' performance on statewide tests in reading, mathematics, and writing also goes up."

Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Standards

The state has adopted standards for the social and emotional skills that K-12 students should be taught.

GOAL 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

- A. Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior
- B. Recognize personal qualities and external supports
- C. Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals

GOAL 2: Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.

- A. Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others
- B. Recognize individual and group similarities and differences
- C. Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others
- D. Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways

GOAL 3: Demonstrate decision making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

- A. Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions
- B. Apply decision making skills to deal with academic and social situations
- C. Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community

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