

BOOK REVIEW

***BUILDING ACADEMIC SUCCESS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?* EDITED BY JOSEPH E. ZINS, ROGER P. WEISSBERG, MARGARET C. WANG, AND HERBERT J. WALBERG (2004), NEW YORK: TEACHER COLLEGE PRESS, 244 PAGES, \$27.95 (SOFTCOVER)**

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Social-emotional learning (SEL) is becoming increasingly popular in schools as educators are beginning to recognize its importance for improving students' academic achievement and the school environment. To help educators better understand the research base for SEL, and to show educators how to apply it in school settings, Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg have written an important, informative book that explains SEL's rationale and offers a strong empirical base for school-based SEL programs.

THESIS

Zins et al. present considerable evidence that SEL can not only improve students' social development and mental health, but can strengthen their academic achievement. Given the enormous pressures on schools to raise academic achievement, such information

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is critical: “In this era of academic accountability, receptivity for SEL programming will be even greater if a strong empirical case is made connecting the enhancement of social and emotional influences to improved school behavior and academic performance” (Zins et al., p. 5).

To accomplish their primary goal—organizing the empirical base for examining SEL as a factor that influences academic achievement—Zins et al. have assembled an impressive array of chapters that powerfully argue for infusing and integrating SEL into academic curricula. This amassing of evidence is important, as it gives readers a single source for studying and sharing the most important information on SEL in the schools.

From the database that Zins et al. present, one can make a compelling argument that SEL should be central to educating students, rather than supplemental or peripheral. This is important for two reasons. First, social-emotional skills form the foundation of interpersonal relationships that are necessary not only in schools but in the family, community, and society at large. Second, teaching and learning are social processes, and as such, SEL must be embedded within them.

OVERVIEW

Building Academic Success is well organized and easily comprehensible for professionals unfamiliar with SEL. Part I focuses on SEL’s foundations and its relevance to school success. It discusses current conceptions of education, including how to offer SEL within academic curriculum, school-family partnerships, peer relations, and teacher preparation standards. Part II discusses SEL programs that have been field tested and offer promising empirical results. Finally, Part III discusses implications for practice, training, research, and policy.

The programs and studies discussed in the book focus on general academic achievement rather than reading per se. Reading scores, however, were sometimes used to gauge academic improvement. Nevertheless, it would be a stretch to use *Building Academic Success* to convincingly argue that SEL interventions were primarily and directly responsible for success in reading. On the other hand, if reading is viewed as a form of learning, and if reading improvement is viewed within the larger context of overall learning and instruction, as several of the authors emphasize, then SEL, as an integrated aspect of the total learning environment has much to offer educators concerned with improving students’ reading abilities.

Two programs that Zins et al. describe are particularly involved in promoting reading: Social Decision Making—Problem Solving and

the Child Development Project. Social Decision Making—Problem Solving illustrates how teachers can use character analysis in literature to teach social problem solving skills. The Child Development Project shows how teachers can use a reading and language arts curriculum to improve peer relationships. Reading teachers wishing to apply SEL to their curricula can readily extract the basic principles and incorporate them into existing interventions. Importantly, the authors note that SEL may not require teachers to re-vamp their existing approaches as they may already be working in a manner that supports SEL. However, because they use different vocabulary, they may not realize that they already have the building blocks of an SEL program in place.

CHAPTERS

Chapter one, “The Scientific Base Linking Social and Emotional Learning to School Success” (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg), shows how SEL relates to academic achievement. Through text and tables, the authors outline key SEL competencies, essential characteristics of effective programming, and academic outcomes produced by different interventions. Academic success is broadly defined in ways that transcend simple testing. It includes attitudes and school behavior as well as academic performance. The authors suggest that academic learning and SEL can be incorporated in ways that reinforce one another, which contributes to a more comprehensive education. They effectively argue that the established link between SEL and academic improvement cannot be ignored.

Chapter two, “The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: A Framework for Balancing Academic Achievement and Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes” (McCombs), describes four clusters of empirically-based psychological factors that support learning: cognitive-metacognitive factors, motivational-affective factors, developmental-social factors, and individual differences. McCombs argues for a “living systems perspective” that considers the learner’s individual needs and the “spirit of [the school] community” when implementing a program (p. 35). She cites research analyzing successful school reform that indicates the need to focus on the personal domain of the learners for programs to be effective. Thus the centrality of students’ social-emotional needs and SEL is linked to academic achievement.

Chapter three presents the “Three C’s of Promoting SEL” (Johnson & Johnson): a cooperative community, constructive conflict resolution, and civic values. Johnson and Johnson suggest that the

interpersonal involvement of students is key to fostering community involvement later in life. Students who learn together, who teach each other, and learn from each other through cooperative interactions increase the social-emotional dimensions of learning. In support of their approach, Johnson and Johnson present a meta-analysis of studies that compare interdependent approaches to learning (cooperative learning) to competitive and individualistic approaches. Overall, their meta-analysis supports the hypothesis that “cooperation tends to promote higher achievement than do competitive or individualistic efforts (effect sizes = 0.67 and 0.64 respectively)” (p. 43).

Chapter 4 (Christenson & Havy) explores students’ motivation and factors that contribute to their persistence toward academic goals. Students who had a strong social support base comprised of peers, teachers, and families tended to stay in school and tended to maintain interest in learning. The authors identified four factors that promoted engagement in learning: specific school policies and practice, caring classroom and school environments, accepting relationships between students, and family support and involvement.

To assess the effects of these factors, Christenson and Havy initiated the “Check and Connect Program.” The program had mentors work directly with students, monitor their progress, and keep them focused on learning while providing encouragement, unconditional positive regard, and consistent availability throughout the students’ K–12 school careers. The mentors also served as a major link between the child’s school and family, illustrating the important influence of both entities on the child’s academic success. The SEL component of this program was its emphasis on persistence and motivation in the face of challenge. As part of an early literacy program for kindergarten students at-risk for reading disabilities, the Check and Connect program produced significant improvements in attendance, social skills, and phonological awareness.

In chapter 5, Lopes and Salovey address one of the difficulties in SEL research: the broad range of social skills used as dependent variables in different studies. Related to this is the finding that developing competence in one set of skills may not generalize to other sets. Moreover, formal training in social skills often fails to generalize beyond classroom setting. They argue that informal leaning through observation, modeling, and experience can have a larger impact on social adaptation. This implies that teachers should use everyday opportunities to teach social and emotional skills.

In chapter 6, Fleming and Bay examine a critical factor in the success of children and SEL programs: teachers and their preparation. They present the notion that teachers often promote SEL standards,

but use vocabulary that often differs from the SEL literature. This often hides what teachers actually do. Consequently, Fleming and Bay analyzed the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards to identify the SEL competencies embedded in it. They offer suggestions on how to integrate SEL into teacher preparation programs through field experience and mentors.

Chapter 7 is the first of five chapters that describes particular SEL programs. Elias discusses his long-running and highly researched program—Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS). By using mnemonics and over-learning, SDM/SPS encourages students to stop and think deeply about a problem before impulsively acting on feelings. He outlines the program's empirical support and then applies SDM/SPS to various subjects, such as language arts, social studies, health/family education, and action oriented projects. Specific to reading, he describes how teachers can use this approach to teach how story characters solve problems. Internalization allows children to generalize these skills to their social situations. He also notes how certain topics encountered in reading exercises (such a topics about fathers) can elicit strong emotional reactions from children in similar situations. In sum, he shows how SDM/SPS provides a structured set of skills to guide students through challenging life situations.

Similar to the chapter on SDM/SPS, the next four chapters show how schools and other agencies can help children develop the social and emotional skills needed to succeed in life. Not only did children improve their social and emotional skills, but they often improved their academic abilities. For example, the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP) positively influenced the problem behaviors, test scores, and grades of children from low-income, high-crime neighborhoods. The Child Development Program (CDP), designed to foster collaborative, respectful relationships within classes, included a reading/language arts curriculum, cooperative learning, classroom management, home-school activities, and support services. Together, these components impacted academic achievement and reading in particular through concerted and systematic attention to the social-emotional dimensions of the school's learning environments. Simply put, when students feel comfortable in the classroom and experience a range of positive affects in connection to learning, they are more likely to engage in, and to enjoy reading.

The last chapter by Walberg, Zins, and Weissberg synthesizes the findings of the previous chapters. They argue that for children to benefit—socially, emotionally, and academically—attention needs to be paid to the quality of the school environment, caring

teacher-student relationships, socially engaging teaching strategies, and teacher-family collaborations. In line with this, they offer numerous recommendations for practice and policy.

SEL, READING, AND SOCIETY

All of this raises the question—how do SEL programs and children’s social and emotional development relate to reading? Much like social-emotional competencies, reading pervades much of what children do. SEL programs and interventions that positively influence academic abilities in general and reading in particular would seem desirable. Reading teachers and other educators need to become aware of the positive changes that can be brought about by infusing SEL in classrooms, curricula, and schools. The studies in this excellent book support the claim that SEL programs can positively influence academic success, of which reading is part.

Moreover, actively engaging students in their academic studies and structuring learning to foster adaptive social skills influences the development of people who can contribute to a better society. And although community and family involvement are necessary for promoting academic achievement, they are also necessary for promoting social and political involvement, the lifeblood of democracy. As social beings, people need the ability to interact constructively with each other; if they can’t, they put society at risk. Thus, SEL offers more than just a set of programs that influence academic achievement. It offers schools the opportunity to influence society as it promotes academic development. Both are important goals of education.