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Social Emotional Learning: Beyond Components and Outcomes

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Social emotional learning (SEL) is the current zeitgeist in education. This collaborative self-study includes a teacher educator and her former student, a high school English Language Arts teacher. Both educators, who center relationships and social justice in their teaching, reflect on what they learned and identify and analyze three tensions experienced by the K-12 teacher: concerns about coming across as too political, responding to parent and caregiver reservations about teaching SEL, and grappling with teachers' emotions in the classroom. Main takeaways are discussed, including the value of partnership between teacher educators and their former students in the development of teaching craft.

Keywords: Social emotional learning, equity, social justice, collaboration

Introduction

“How will my students feel?” We started our collaborative self-study because of this question. Lina is a teacher educator and Tara is a secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teacher and Lina’s former graduate student. We met when Tara took a course on classroom management with Lina, who taught the course through the lens of social and emotional learning (SEL), prioritizing self-awareness, emotional awareness, and belonging in her teaching. SEL, coined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is defined as the process through which children and adults develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Specifically, SEL includes five components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Tara was drawn to SEL, specifically, SEL’s recognition of the role of emotions in learning and the attention given to relationships and community building in the classroom. Thus, we continued our conversations after Tara graduated and started teaching English Literature and Composition at the high school level. During that year, we spoke regularly. Tara was grappling with the role of emotions in the classroom, especially when discussing topics that focused on equity. Tara also shared her thoughts on her efforts towards building classroom community and fostering self-awareness. Lina was particularly interested in what SEL looks like when integrated in K-12 teaching, especially since our conversations illustrated that Tara was intentionally approaching her teaching through an SEL lens, focusing on self and emotional awareness, social awareness, and building community. Tara, as an early career educator, was interested in further exploring how SEL informs her teaching and reflecting on her teaching with another educator. Since we were both committed to equity, we wanted to further explore the connection between

SEL and equity. The purpose of this article is to present the lessons we learned about SEL through our collaboration.

SEL in Schools: Brief Overview

Classrooms are emotional spaces but emotions have been historically excluded from the realm of learning because they were perceived as distracting and unruly (Bialostok & Aronson, 2016). Thus, students were expected to suppress their emotions before they entered the classroom. Two publications changed that stance (Elias et al., 1997; Goleman, 1995) and increased the interest in emotional intelligence and SEL in schools, which grew exponentially (Hoffman, 2009). Over the years, SEL approaches have been included in schools in different ways. For example, SEL has been implemented as a structured curriculum with time set aside during the school day for specific lessons focused on SEL. Sometimes SEL has been part of a school-wide approach in which its principles are included in the fabric of a school's life (Hamedani et al., 2015). At other times, particularly with high school students, SEL has been in the form of after-school and out-of-school opportunities such as service learning (Osher et al., 2016). Nonetheless, integrating SEL with the curriculum, especially during high school, remains an elusive task as suggested by the dearth of literature in this area (see Yeager, 2017).

A number of studies have shown the long-term benefits of SEL. For example, in a meta-analysis, Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that participation in universal, school-based, SEL programs was linked to improvement in students' social-emotional skills, prosocial behavior, attitudes toward school, and academic achievement, and a reduction in conduct problems. In one longitudinal study (Hawkins et al., 2008) of students who participated in a school-based SEL program during the elementary grades, fifteen years later -as young adults- showed better mental health, attained higher educational levels, and were more likely to be employed. Randomized control trials of different programs such as: 4Rs, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), and Positive Action reported improvement in academic effort and achievement (Bavarian et al., 2013; Jones, Brown & Aber, 2011; Schonfeld et al., 2015).

However, SEL programs have a number of gaps. For instance, structured curricula of SEL programs have not been as successful with adolescents (Yeager, 2017) and programs have their own challenges. Many are often implemented in isolation from the curriculum and the school's daily life or do not take the socio-political context into consideration. Although one can learn valuable skills through programs, SEL has to become a natural part of the classroom to be sustainable as suggested by the SEL literature (e.g., Hamedani et al., 2015; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Osher et al., 2016). Additionally, some of the programs' lack of flexibility in implementation stifles teachers' freedom and creativity, both critical to teachers' ability to respond to the individual needs of their students. Third, the costs of program materials, training, and sustaining a program could be prohibitive for school districts, which are already struggling with funding.

Furthermore, a number of scholars questioned whether the prominent programs and approaches of SEL reflect and promote the cultural assets and well-being of youth from minoritized groups and underprivileged backgrounds (Jagers et al., 2019). Importantly, others have pointed out that SEL has fallen short in addressing issues of power, privilege, and institutional racism (Mirra, 2018; Osher et al., 2016). Teaching is not neutral or apolitical (Nieto, 2006) but many SEL/SEL programs are often presented with little attention to context. Recently, Simmons (2019) lamented that SEL is often taught without any reference to the wider sociopolitical context, which is replete with the inequity affecting students' lives. Similarly,

Mirra (2018) raised concerns about SEL, particularly, that SEL's primary objective, as identified by CASEL, is improved academic performance. Mirra suggested that this focus wrongly assumes that students need to adapt and change to live up to the expectations of school and society, which are deeply inequitable. Relatedly, Simmons (2017) revealed that her conversations with educators participating in an SEL program have indicated that some teachers, with a deficient view of students of color in particular, saw the SEL program as a "savior" that has transformed the student from being lazy and unmotivated to becoming motivated and attentive (Simmons, 2017). It is also important to note that SEL's focus on individual characteristics does not guarantee that students will develop into adults who would stand up to unjust laws. Westheimer (2015) has stated that while it is important to teach about kindness and empathy toward others, it is not enough because a democratic society requires more than these individual-centered qualities. In fact, sometimes kindness and empathy can be used to avoid the critical examination of injustice (Westheimer, 2015).

We would be remiss if we also do not recognize that most recently CASEL and several of its lead researchers (e.g., Jagers et al., 2019) have been focusing on what is missing from mainstream SEL and working on ensuring that SEL attends to our unjust system which alienates and marginalizes youth from minoritized groups. These recent changes show that SEL is dynamic, contextual, and complex.

The Authors' Views on SEL

SEL has been described as "fluff" or "soft" by some (see Preston, 2019; Vaishnav et al., 2016) but for both of us learning about SEL was transformative. We both saw the complexity of the emotions that arise during learning, especially when learners are grappling with topics like systemic injustice. We also saw how the relational nature of learning impacted students in classrooms. (e.g., through group work, students' reflections on how they affected their peers' learning, or through students turning to one another for feedback):

Tara: SEL gave me an academic language to articulate the deeply emotional facets of teaching because much of my practice is built on the foundation of a question: How will students feel? I believe that emotions were omnipresent in the classroom and that I need to center them. Neglecting feelings ran the risk of isolating students from their learning and their classroom.

Lina: I found that SEL provided me with the knowledge and skills to model for pre-service teachers what a sense of community, self and emotional awareness look like in teaching children and youth—skills that were sorely missing while I was studying to become a teacher over two decades ago. When I teach classroom management, I use SEL to ask pre-service teachers questions about their own sources of power when teaching, to get them to examine how their students' needs and their own needs played out in the classroom, and to build their classroom environment based on the principles of emotional literacy (Brackett, 2019), choice theory (Glasser, 1998), restitution (Gossen, 2004), restorative justice (Smith et al., 2015) and ethics of care (Noddings, 2005). I believed that for SEL to be meaningful it must not be limited to weekly 1-hour lessons disconnected from the socio-political context and students' lives—it needs to be integrated with the curriculum. Furthermore, I have experienced tension with SEL due to the absence of discourse on power, privilege, and systemic inequities, which all evoke strong emotions.

We both saw the potential in leveraging SEL as a means for students to work individually *and* collectively and to unpack emotions connected to issues of injustice and inequity although we were aware that mainstream SEL was not being utilized in that way. Also, we understood

from our experiences in classrooms that when students' emotions are recognized and validated and their need for belonging is met, they are more likely to stay engaged, to develop a sense of competence toward their learning, and to perform better academically.

Method

A self-study stems from a teacher-researcher's desire to "better align theory and practice" and to build on what one learns through some public process (Loughran, 2007, p. 14). Self-study methodology gave us the opportunity to critically evaluate our practice and to identify lessons learned from our partnership given that there is often a disconnect between teacher education programs and K-12 schools (Ketter & Stoffel, 2008).

Tara taught at a racially and economically diverse high school in the Pacific Northwest. Lina visited two to three of Tara's classrooms at least twice a week between February and June 2019, writing down her observations of Tara's teaching and debriefing with Tara between periods and during lunch breaks. At the end of each week, Lina read and reflected on these observations. The reflections included documented notes from the classroom and Lina's interpretations and questions. We met four times to discuss Lina's reflections, going back and forth between the reflections and the observations. Lina took notes during the meeting and these notes were shared with Tara. Using our discussions notes, we identified three different themes coalescing around the tensions Tara found in her teaching because of her focus on SEL: 1) tension between incorporating social justice with SEL and concern for coming across as too political, 2) tension between including SEL, teacher autonomy, and what parents/guardians would say and 3) tension between attending to teacher's emotions while unpacking tough topics and positionality. These tensions helped us identify the lessons we learned from our partnership and offered us a new way of looking at SEL.

Findings

Could My Teaching Get Too Political? Noticing her students' preoccupation with grades, Tara decided that the first writing unit for the semester would involve students writing a letter to an audience of their choice (e.g., a parent, a principal, a teacher) sharing what intelligence and success personally meant to them. She wanted her students to become more self-aware of how they thought and felt about grades and to think about how they approach their learning so that they can set learning goals that are meaningful to them. The task involved reflecting on how success and intelligence are viewed in society, doing research, interviewing adults students saw as successful, and synthesizing their own views. She wanted them to become more self-aware of their thoughts and emotions about how society defined intelligence and success. She focused on several aspects of SEL including self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. Their first Socratic Seminar was based on their understanding of these two concepts.

Tara's focus on self-awareness and community in the classroom was clear. Before their Socratic Seminar, she asked students to take a look at the lesson's communication goals and to reflect on what it meant for them. Specifically, she asked them to unpack what the goal: "I am conscious of taking and making space throughout the discussion" meant. She instructed students to take a moment and write what this goal meant to them and how they wanted to feel during and after the discussion. Then, she asked students to consider whether they thought making space for others or taking space was their strength and to jot down a few justifications of their thinking. After the Socratic Seminar, Tara asked her students to write about what they learned about

themselves and their peers from this experience and what are they taking with them beyond the classroom.

Although Tara focused on student self-awareness while discussing expectations for communication during the Socratic Seminar, the questions students discussed during the Socratic Seminar did not address self-awareness regarding their privileges (or lack of privilege) and sources of power (or lack of power) in relation to intelligence and success. Specifically, Lina noticed that Tara did not raise questions that got students to examine the impact of their positionalities, identities, and our system on their views. The questions were mostly about how intelligence and success impacted them personally. She could have questioned what their collective thoughts on the issue implied about our society's values. For example, she could have asked them what their thoughts about success and intelligence revealed about the kind of society they hoped to live in or how their success could uplift their society. She could have asked them about what has shaped their views. The Socratic Seminar provided an opportunity to raise questions about our inequitable system.

In reflecting on the lesson, Tara recognized that designing a unit involving questioning society's views about intelligence, grades, and success already felt political. A focus on equity might have been perceived as too political and perhaps get her into trouble. As an early career educator, Tara did not feel comfortable in taking this step. This experience got us to see that only focusing on how students are thinking and feeling and fostering positive relationships is not enough to get them to think critically about their society and who it serves and who it does not.

What Will Caregivers Say? During one of Lina's visits, she noticed that Tara had a poster lying on one of her teacher tables underneath other stacks of papers and class materials. Looking more closely, Lina found that it had the five SEL components. The poster piqued Lina's curiosity: why did the poster end up discarded although Tara's teaching clearly focused on SEL? During a brief conversation in between classes, Tara explained that at the beginning of the year (in September) she discussed them with her students. However, they did not go back to the poster. Then, during one of our longer meetings, Tara clarified that she moved away from components and opted to utilize them as sets of questions that she worked to answer alongside her students. Her adaptation centered as well as challenged students' points of view and then encouraged them to rebuild more thoughtfully or critically. For example, in her lesson planning and teaching, self-awareness became opening reflection questions in their journals: How do I feel today? Why do I feel this way? Such questions worked to answer bigger questions throughout the year: Who am I? Why am I this way? Do I want to change? Because of this translation, SEL became more implicit than explicit in her teaching. She found that the questions gave her a sense of respite in a world that leaves little room for agency or questioning, especially for youth. Presenting SEL as components seemed static.

Her other reason for referring to SEL more implicitly is a little more complicated but central to transforming components into questions. Early on in her teaching, Tara realized that explicit SEL strategies are easily perceived as non-academic - there were times when parents/guardians reminded her that it was not her job to talk emotions, it was to teach English-to deliver content. Her approach gave her agency.

What to Do with Teachers' Emotions? Tara used learning instances to help her students grapple with emotions that have been constructed as a result of culture, power (or lack of), and identity. For example, in responding to unease and confusion in a sheltered classroom—

a classroom that supports English Language Learners by incorporating language and content so they are learned in tandem—about September 11, Tara used it as a learning opportunity. She engaged with it by reading about September 11 from different sources with her students and inviting critical reflection on the different texts and who the authors were (i.e.: their positionalities). She also explored concepts like stereotypes, group identity (what was going on for Americans, Muslims, people of color), and relationships. Tara candidly asked about how identity could affect how different groups perceived the aftermath of September 11, particularly xenophobia. She raised questions like “how do we move past a judgment or a stereotype?” “How do we treat an individual after something like this, as an individual or as a member of a group?” She pondered with her students about the messiness of relationships, acknowledging the role of identity. When debriefing immediately after class, she shared that she was very aware of her position of privilege as “the teacher” and as a White woman. Her positionality made her feel uneasy. Critically reading different sources alongside her students, asking open-ended questions and inviting students to ask her questions, and responding to their emotions was her attempt at decentering her power.

Later, during one of our longer meetings, Tara further explained that she was aware of the impact of systems of injustice on emotions. These emotions, which could be overwhelming, could precede finding the language to articulate them. Although classrooms tend to be spaces where strong emotions are not encouraged, students will often grapple with emotions that have been constructed because of injustice and power disparities. Tara saw that the only way to disrupt those systems was to attend to emotions as they arose—centering them in the classroom; students did not have to wait until they had “coherent thoughts” on the topic. Adults need to create spaces that invite such explorations, engaging with students by opening up space for their emotions, showing unconditional positive regard, and genuine curiosity.

In another class during the pre-reading of the unit on *Night* (Wiesel, 1960), the poignant autobiography of Elie Wiesel who survived the Nazi death camp when he was a teenager, Tara started class by asking her students to respond to the prompt: “I’m feeling ... and one question I have is...”. When addressing students, she shared feeling heavy; the weight of the unit had a visible impact on her tone and words. She emphasized that the Holocaust was not something easy to talk about but it was important. She welcomed them to share their thoughts in that moment. After the class, Tara shared that she was disappointed because she displayed her heavy emotions to students. She would have preferred if she did not choke on her words while introducing the topic since she was the adult in the room.

Implications for Teacher Education

Our collaboration revealed the tensions involved in teaching the curriculum through the lens of SEL in K-12. It also identified SEL’s shortcomings in addressing inequity. First, SEL components do not need to be static. Tara adapted the components into dynamic questions that fit her lessons’ objectives and they changed with the lesson. Her approach addresses concerns raised in the literature about making time for SEL when most teachers have a very demanding curriculum. It gives teachers greater autonomy to approach SEL in ways that work for them and their students. Tara felt a sense of agency when she turned the components into tools (i.e. questions) that worked for her and her students. This was critical for her as an early career educator who was acutely aware that students’ parents/legal guardians might resist the inclusion of emotions in the classroom. Importantly, when SEL’s components are adapted into questions, educators could utilize them to fit the lives and the socio-political context of their students,

making them more relevant to students' lived experiences and becoming an integral part of learning rather than detached from the classroom.

Tara integrated SEL with content seamlessly. For example, she focused an entire unit on intelligence and success because she wanted her students to work together in becoming more self-aware of their approach to learning and grades. Yet, we also found that the concern for coming across as “too political” was a tension that prevented Tara from integrating SEL with social justice at times. Here we are reminded of child advocate Alice Ray's words: “Social-emotional learning in the absence of social justice—simply isn't” (Duffell, 2017). Teachers' concerns about coming across as “too political” is usually a way to preserve Whiteness and White privilege in education and teacher education programs contribute it (see Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2016; Ohito, 2016), but “teaching is inherently political” (Nieto, 2006, p.1). Fears of coming across as “too political” prevent educators from leveraging SEL as a tool to help unpack questions that address issues of social justice.” For Lina, this observation highlighted the importance of constantly questioning how she uses SEL as a lens to promote social justice.

hooks (1994) criticized the practice of educators not bringing their entire selves to the classroom, as teachers should not remain neutral and have an “objective mind” when they encounter stories of cruelty and injustice. Although Tara centered her students' emotions and their impact on their learning, she was disappointed when she showed strong emotions while introducing *Night*. These observations and conversations with Tara compelled Lina to realize how little space is given to help pre-service teachers process and unpack the emotional aspects of teaching, especially when SEL and social justice are a priority. Similarly, schools are not spaces that allow for teachers to express emotions. If educators are committed to social justice and equity, then there is a need for them to bring their entire selves as hooks (1994) puts it and teacher educators have an obligation to model that.

Tara also recognized the weight of the emotional effort required to do this important work. She explained that teachers want to engage in this work, but often, teacher education programs do not offer the tools for teachers to confront their fears in regard to their students' feelings and histories, not to mention their own role in racist systems. Tara found that pre-service teachers learn a lot about the systems themselves, but there is little in terms of what to do with the emotions so intimately tied to them, which are often ones of shame, guilt, and anger. Mainstream SEL has recently started to pay attention to teachers' SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and the role of teacher education programs in teachers' SEL (e.g., Schonert-Reichl, 2017) but the focus on bringing an equity lens to teachers' SEL has not been adequately addressed yet. What could be beneficial for teacher educators in the future is to expand on mainstream SEL by coupling with critical civic empathy (Mirra, 2018). According to Mirra (2018), there are three defining aspects to critical civic empathy: “1- It begins from an analysis of the social position, power, and privilege of all parties involved; 2- It focuses on the ways that personal experiences matter in the context of public life; 3- It fosters democratic dialogue and civic action committed to equity and justice” (p. 7). Additionally, in preparing teachers, mainstream SEL would benefit from the literature on critical emotional teaching which focuses on the layered roles that power plays in classroom learning process and approaches emotions as constructed through language, culture, and power (Lewis & Bigelow, 2019). There might be tensions in combining these concepts but they can be enriching for pre-service teachers. Because SEL in schools is increasingly gaining significance and equity is central to the mission of many teacher education programs, teacher educators must critically examine their efforts in these two areas and address the emotional work required of teachers.

Concluding Thoughts

Student engagement and students experiencing success at school matter. Students learning to deconstruct our deeply unjust system also matters. SEL needs a critical focus that goes beyond the individual to address systemic injustices. Large-scale studies do not capture what is going for teachers trying to teach with an SEL lens and advance equity. It is complex work that requires examining the lives of classrooms. Therefore, there are advantages to creating a sustainable process where teacher educators and teachers can collaborate to learn about teaching for community, emotional awareness, and equity. After all, educators across all levels are life-long students of teaching.

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