

Education for the heart

Stacey Burnard shares research about social-emotional learning and how it empowers students to find success through resiliency and managing the inevitable failure.

Social-emotional learning (SEL), a relatively new concept to the educational world, but is now a much regarded, necessary, element in any curriculum.

Social-emotional learning is a philosophy, a lens into how we interact with others. It is *education for the heart*.

Aristotle aptly wrote, “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”

Research states that schools that create learning environments that help students and staff develop greater social and emotional competency, help ensure academic and personal outcomes for students, as well as higher levels of teaching and work satisfaction for staff.

“Social-emotional learning is the process of developing students’ social-emotional competencies, that is, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours that individuals need to make successful choices. “According to leading researchers at the Collaborative for Academic, social-emotional learning is comprised of five competency areas including self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness and perspective taking, relationships skills and responsible decision-making. Social-emotional learning is the process through

which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid engaging in negative behaviours.

Building these types of internal assets, through providing classroom climates of relationships and caring, allow for students to pursue their passions by taking risks and learning to manage failure, which is critical to the potential success of students.

We only need to look to the Finland educational model to see the successful outcomes that accrue when the focus in our classrooms is on building these social-emotional assets of cooperative play, self-regulation and perspective taking. In that model, the first few years of educational focus is solely on building emotional competencies, relegating the pursuit of academics to the latter elementary years.

SEL is not only about student wellness and building internal assets for life success, but it is also teacher wellness. Educators are the models for children, and they must be passionate about teaching for children to be engaged. Dropout rates are significantly high and a global concern. In Europe, a term, NEET (*Not*

in Education, Employment, or Training), has been developed to capture youth who have become disengaged, not educated, employed or in training programs. We need to make some changes to how we are educating our children and youth.

Rita Pierson, a veteran educator, suggests children do not learn from people they don’t like. Teachers must socially, emotionally and physically healthy and open their hearts to create caring conditions for learning. It is equally critical that parents are responsive rather than reactive and impulsive, in their problem-solving and their interactions with kids, as these encounters are all opportunities for learning.

Teachers are considered ‘stress hardy’ if they remain in the profession more than five years. They are “on” all the time. The demands are increasing: from a multitude of diverse learning styles, and increased accountability measures, to a changing partnership with parents. Educators teach who they are and need to be mindful of how and what is conveyed to students.

Educators need to build relationships and classrooms that are welcoming, challenging, inclusive, and promote risk-taking. A key to improving the academic achievement of students in the 21st Century is the degree of relational trust established with adults. Safe and caring climates of relationships in our classroom/homes, will encourage children to pursue their creativity and passions to become independent, lifelong learners. We need to “work with” our children, not “to” as in the traditional, compliance-based model of education.

It is the delivery of these SEL skills through instruction, and mostly through modeling and action, that builds social citizenship in our

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youth. This is through a continuum of offerings in our schools and in our homes, from daily interactions of smiling and saying “hello,” to integrating concepts into our curriculum such as, examining acts of pro-social behaviours in literature, analyzing the cost-benefits and ripple effect of aid to Third World countries in maths, to school-wide community initiatives or programs that focus on conflict resolution and generosity. It is developing sustainable internal assets in our children and youth so they can make choices that reflect strong moral values, rather than consequenting them for performing a given act or behaviour.


The Ministry of Education in British Columbia is currently developing three cross-curricular competencies, one of which specifically highlights social-emotional competencies: they are critical and creative thinking skills, communication (language and digital literacy) skills, and personal and social competencies.

To find success in this ever changing and interdependent world, students require a new skill set. They require resiliency and according to Carol Dweck, they need a growth mindset: that you can succeed through hard work, and are able to manage and in fact view, failure as a learning opportunity. They require an understanding of emotional literacy as workplaces now demand these “soft skills” of social relatedness.

School districts are beginning

to undertake more SEL programming as well as organically develop improved cultures of caring in their schools. Secular mindfulness programs, such as the MindUP program, which are supported by neuroscience research, are bringing mindfulness listening and the honing of attention back to schools. Concepts such as acts of kindness, acts of gratitude and giving back to the community through acts of generosity and outreach are supporting

students in recognizing the satisfaction of giving and building community and social citizenships. Interest in the area of self-regulation is burgeoning as the need for emotional modulation and the attentiveness has increased.

Should schools be teaching it? Education is in a transformational time. Education must include the so-called “soft” skills not just the “hard,” academic knowledge. In order to be successful we need to know our strengths/weaknesses, effectively work in teams, and thereby understand perspective and empathy, make decisions that are not only based on critical analysis and be effectively communicated, but reflect compassionate understanding, and we must be able to overcome obstacles and persevere. 

Stacey Burnard, MA, MBA, B.Ed, has worked in the field of educational for 20 years. A background in clinical psychology she has held positions in the area of special education, behaviour specialist, educational psychologist and social-emotional learning. She has written for Insights and a number of BCTF magazines, some of her FASD articles are required reading at a Masters level at UBC and she has published *Putting the Pieces Together: Building a Curriculum of Caring* in 2008 and has presented at FNEESC, BCTF conferences and the CCBID International conference. She can be reached at s_burnard@yahoo.com



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