

INTEGRATING SEL INTO INSTRUCTION

Schools serving high concentrations of poor students often view socioemotional learning (SEL), which is instruction that teaches self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as an “extra” that can be considered once academic competencies have improved. However, research clearly shows that students with low socioemotional skills are limited in their ability to benefit from academic instruction.

SEL can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds overcome the cognitive and psychological traumas associated with growing up in stressful, unstable, and unsafe environments. SEL improves concentration, responding to directions, stress management, and many other factors that enables school success.

Because many teachers and schools have limited time and must navigate instruction first accountability climates, these research-to-practice briefs are dedicated to fostering the integration of SEL into academic instruction.

Social-Emotional Learning and Academics: Better Together

Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into the academic curriculum not only benefits students, but also teachers and other school personnel. In addition to behavioral improvement, SEL has been linked to gains in academic achievement. When classroom behavioral functioning improves, students are better prepared to engage in academic work. While more and more educators and families are becoming aware of the benefits of SEL for a child’s development, these skills still often remain separated from the core curriculum in classrooms.

Common Core and SEL

Teaching students how to share ideas respectfully, have empathy for academically diverse peers, push through challenges to meet goals, and control their impulses are just as important as teaching them to read fluently, multiply fractions, and write a well-constructed essay. We, along with many others, argue that the development of strong social and emotional competencies is particularly important for students who struggle academically because classroom learning occurs through interpersonal interactions.

Too frequently, schools overlook the social and emotional factors in their efforts to support struggling learners. Academic interventions, for example, generally focuses on instructional practices that isolate struggling students from the regular classroom and/or groups them with students who also lack SEL skills.

Rather than treat SEL as a tangential or additional component to regular classroom instruction, schools should treat it as an integral part of classroom instruction. Integrating SEL into academic instruction can be seamless with just a little additional planning. This begins with identifying the connections between SEL and existing curriculum standards.

Below are examples of the connections one teacher found between the 5th Grade Common Core Standards and five core social and emotional competencies established by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning:

SEL Competency: Self-Awareness

- CCSS Reading/Foundational Skills: Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, re-reading as necessary.

SEL Competency: Self-Management

- CCSS Math: [Mathematically proficient students] monitor and evaluate their progress and change course if necessary.

SEL Competency: Social Awareness

- CCSS Speaking and Listening: Engage in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

“Learning these social and emotional skills is especially important for students who struggle in school academically...”
--Mike Anderson

SEL Competency: Relationship Skills

- CCSS Writing: With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed.

SEL Competency: Responsible Decision Making

- CCSS Speaking and Listening: Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.

Identifying these connections helps the teacher to think about how to include SEL into instructional lesson plans.

Teaching SEL Skills

Like academic instruction, SEL requires that teachers think not only about what they will teach, but also how they will approach instruction. The first step is to identify what SEL skills to focus on and how to integrate them with existing curricular standards. Next, teachers need to establish development outcomes for students and facilitate instructional practices that promote student growth towards these goals. As with academic instruction, students usually do not develop a skill from one lesson, but rather their growth stems from engaging

with appropriately scaffolded activities over time.

Modeling social-emotional skills is an effective practice. Teachers should model SEL skills not only as part of academic learning, but also across multiple contexts and lessons. For example, the respect for others and self-awareness that students demonstrate in group work around a set of math problems should also be present during a social studies debate. In these cases, a teacher should not only remind students to uphold certain class norms, but also actively demonstrate to students what respect and self-awareness looks like and build their understanding of the importance of developing these skills.

Differentiation is also an important element of effective integration. While SEL benefits all students, differentiated support can be provided to small groups and individual students as part of regular academic instruction. In the same way that teachers help students identify and work towards academic goals, teachers should also help students set goals for personal social and emotional development.

Patience and practice are required, but becoming more socially and emotionally skilled requires training. Opportunities in the classroom should allow students to try out different skills, receive feedback and reflect on their progress and continually practice in authentic settings.

A Look into an SEL-Integrated Classroom

Mr. Adams uses several strategies to help his 6th grade students develop their social and emotional skills while also getting the most out of their literature groups.

Planning. After identifying specific SEL and academic skills to focus on, Mr. Adams envisions

what student groups will look like if they are operating successfully. He then lists specific SEL skills that students need to practice. For example, Mr. Adams wants students to be able to follow collegial norms while engaging in collaborative discussions with diverse partners. He realizes that in order to do so, students will need practice making eye contact with the speaker, sharing air time with other group members, and disagreeing respectfully.

Choice. Mr. Adams gives students five different science fiction novels to choose from for their literature groups. He helps them explore their options and make informed decisions based on their interests and reading levels. Giving students choice boosts motivation while also helping them to build decision-making skills, a key set of SEL skills.

Thoughtful grouping. After students submit their top two choices, Mr. Adams creates groups with an eye for diversity. Grouping students with different abilities, interests, and personalities while also separating students who often struggle to stay focused when together, ensures that students are exposed to diverse viewpoints in a productive manner.

Group norms. Once groups are formed, Mr. Adams leads his students through a process of creating group norms—rules that help to guide their discussions. Usually, students come up with norms that include making sure everyone participates, treating each other with respect and kindness, and coming prepared for discussions.

Direct teaching and practice. To show what certain social and emotional skills look like, Mr. Adams will model them to students. He may, for example, role play a scene with another student to show what respectful disagreement in a conversation looks like. After the role play, he will lead students in a discussion to synthesize what respectful disagreement means, how to do

it, and why it's important to collaborative discussions. As students practice the skills in their reading groups, Mr. Adams floats from group-to-group, coaching and reinforcing social-emotional skills, like respectful disagreement, as well as academic skills.

Reflect. Mr. Adams, who is an experienced teacher, saw an important shift in students' behaviors after he began integrating SEL into instruction. Whereas disagreements would lead to hurt feelings that interrupted the academic work in the past, practicing the new skills with teacher support helped students respectfully respond to different viewpoints this time around and consequently engage with the books on a deeper level. An additional exercise would be to have students think about how well they practiced these skills and how they can improve to enhance future discussions.

Steps for Integrating SEL with Academic Instruction

Outlined below are several steps to follow for schools, grade-level teams, or departments interested in integrating SEL with academic instruction:

Develop a common understanding of SEL. A common understanding of SEL is foundational for collaboration. Consider exploring the CASEL website or other related resources together as an initial step. Discussions will make sure that everyone is on the same page about what SEL is and why it's important.

Identify skills your students need. Look through your academic standards and identify the embedded SEL skills. Observe students in action and look for strengths and skills that are missing. Come together to share observations and to identify a manageable set of priorities. Ask yourselves, what skills are most important for your students?

Identify what you are already doing. Surely, many teachers are already doing things in their classrooms to help students develop the SEL skills they need. Create space to share what teachers are doing and give each other constructive feedback on how to improve SEL practices. What existing practices and structures in the school/amongst the team already support such development well? What have teachers done that have been successful and worth trying for others? Remember to celebrate and strengthen these positive strategies.

Choose one or two next steps. Be careful not to take on too many goals and objectives at once. Instead, brainstorm 1-2 possible next steps, and focus on implementing those well. Include assessing your progress as part of the work, so that you can fine-tune structures and practices or drop them altogether if they do not seem to be working. Having a professional learning community in the building will help to structure this work of improving instructional practice and systems of support. Perhaps each teacher in a grade-level team will try one strategy (such as modeling), and share the results in a manner that provides feedback and learning for all teachers.

Adapted from:

Smith, B. (n.d.). Social-emotional learning and academics. Seattle, WA: Committee for Children. Retrieved from www.cfchildren.org