Practical Social-Emotional Learning Tools for Students with Specific Learning Disabilities in the United States of America

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental right for all children which must be guaranteed in every nation. Unfortunately, children with disabilities have been marginalized in many countries preventing them from accessing an appropriate education. Although some countries have legislation that guarantees educational rights to children with disabilities, some of the laws are not comprehensive enough to ensure that these children benefit from their educational experience. Hence, for many children with disabilities the educational experience does not guarantee them positive adult outcomes. However, some industrialized countries, like the United States of America (USA), have made significant progress in this area by establishing comprehensive laws to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities to education are guaranteed through provisions that entitle them to an appropriate education. Because of this, the author uses the special education law in the USA as a benchmark in examining special education law in Zimbabwe, albeit the USA is not being treated as a gold standard but just a model.

Throughout the United States of America, educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of promoting emotional resiliency and positive social development in youth by incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction within the general curriculum (Elias, 2004; Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000; Zins, 2001). SEL is defined as the "knowledge and skills that children acquire through social and emotional-related education, instruction, activities, or promotion efforts that help them recognize and manage emotion, engage in responsible decision making, and establish positive relationships" (Zins, 2001, p. 441). An increased appreciation for SEL instruction has arisen following awareness of the significant effects of SEL on critical school and life outcomes. Improved SEL serves to prevent high-risk behaviors, such as substance abuse, delinquency, and violence (Elias, Lantieri, Patti, Walberg, & Zins, 1999; Ross, Powell, & Elias, 2002; Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001), and is also associated with positive school-related outcomes, such as social acceptance, problem solving skills, stress management, and academic success (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Greenberg and colleagues (2003) found that effective social and emotional instruction improves students' abilities to recognize and manage emotion, understand and appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and cope with interpersonal conflicts. Long-term positive life outcomes are also associated with SEL, including high school completion, healthy marriage, stable family, and employment success (Elias et al., 2000; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004; Zins et al., 2004).

School-based initiatives that encourage SEL are particularly important for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). "Specific learning disability" is defined in the United States by the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) as:

> a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The terms does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (20 U.S.C. § 1401 [30]).

It is noteworthy that the U. S. federal definition of SLD neglects to address the social and emotional deficits of students with SLD. The literature is replete with research indicating students with SLD tend to struggle with SEL (Bryan, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000; Nowicki, 2003; Romasz, Kantor, & Elias, 2004; Ross et al., 2002; Elias & Tobias, 1996). Indeed, deficits in SEL have been observed in research conducted in the United States and in nations across the globe, including Canada (Whitley, Lupart, & Beran, 2007), China (Yuehua, 2004), and Norway (Holden & Gitlesen, 2007). Therefore, it

is imperative that educational planning teams consider the SEL needs of students with SLD.

The purpose of this article is to (a) provide practical school-based strategies for addressing the SEL needs of students with learning disabilities, (b) provide recommendations for successful implementation of SEL initiatives, and (c) discuss common barriers to SEL implementation.

Selected Intervention Strategies to Address the SEL Needs of Students with SLD

We offer practical, research-based suggestions for promoting growth within the following four critical social and emotional skills: emotional knowledge, emotional expression, empathy, and social problem solving. These particular skill areas have been recognized as critical skills within the five key SEL competencies defined by Zins and colleagues (2007): self-awareness; social awareness; responsible decision-making; self-management; and relationship management, and are included within the social emotional skills set defined by the Collaboration for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2003): know yourself and others; make responsible decisions; care for others; and know how to act.

Suggestions offered below must be considered within the context of the culture of the student and the surrounding community. It is important teachers understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students because different cultural groups have different emotional norms. Although there is a degree of universality in the interpretation of facial expressions, the manner in which individuals describe, interpret, and express emotions varies significantly across cultures (Scherer & Wallbott, 1994). For example, when compared to individuals from collectivist cultures (e.g. Eastern Europe and Asia), those from individualistic cultures (e.g. Western Europe and North America) tend to express emotions more liberally (Niedenthal, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2006).

Emotional Knowledge

Students with SLD often have difficulty recognizing their own emotions, particularly those beyond the basic emotions of happy, sad, and mad (Elias, 2004). To develop appropriate emotional understanding, students must learn to identify complex emotions and the vocabulary necessary to articulate a wide range of feeling states. Teachers can employ a several practical strategies to facilitate emotional knowledge. For instance, teachers can instruct students to identify an emotion by linking thoughts and body reactions (e.g., clenched fists, furrowed brow, sweaty palms) to feelings. Students also benefit from vocabulary lists containing more complicated emotional labels (e.g. frustrated, discouraged, perplexed, elated, and delighted). It is important to incorporate opportunities for practice using "I feel…when…" statements. For example, writing assignments

can help students identify a situation associated with an emotion, such as, "I feel angry when _____," or identify an emotion often associated with a situation, such as "I feel _____ when I get a poor grade on a test."

Emotional Expression

Instruction in emotional knowledge is critical; however, students also need explicit instruction in socially appropriate emotional expression. Students should be taught that intense emotional states, like anger, are normal reactions to aversive situations. However, such strong emotions require regulation. Students learn that they can consciously choose how to respond, rather than feeling helpless in the face of anger, limited to outbursts (externalization), or suppression (internalization) of intense emotions (Merrell, Carrizales, Feuerborn, Gueldner, & Tran, 2007).

Practical strategies for coping with stressful situations and pro-social emotional expression can be implemented in the classroom. A graphic or a drawing of a pressure gauge, barometer, or thermometer can facilitate the discussion and understanding of the range of emotional intensity. Thermometers can be used proactively, prior to emotional events, to discuss how one might appropriately react to emotions that are less intense or cool, e.g. relaxed, to more emotions that are more intense or hot, e.g. anger (Elias, 2004). Additionally, "If-then" statements may be used to link behaviors to outcomes or consequences, "If my temperature is hot and I am feeling angry, then I will use my anger tools (count-down, self-talk, etc.). If my temperature is hot and I don't use my tools but yell at my group partner, then I will get in trouble (detention, call home to parents, etc.) and may lose a friend." Thermometers can also be used "in the moment" by referring to the thermometer to help the student identify his or her emotion, the level of emotional intensity, and an appropriate means of expressing the emotion.

To help students cope with intense situations, teachers can model strategies that promote mental and physical relaxation, such as stress awareness and coping techniques (Merrell, 2001). It is important to inform students how stress affects people mentally and physically. For example, students learn the physical and mental cues to better identify when they are stressed, e.g., stiff neck and shoulders, clenched teeth and jaws, upset digestion, irritability, and racing thoughts. After they have learned to recognize feeling stressed, students should also learn coping techniques. Teachers can model techniques to promote physical relaxation, e.g. deep breathing and gradually relaxing parts of the body, and mental relaxation, e.g. counting backwards, calming self-talk, and imagining a serene environment. Further, students may benefit from opportunities to practice relaxing their bodies and minds before tense situations (e.g. prior to the administration of high-stakes tests, a common occurrence in American schools).

Empathy

When students with SLD have difficulty understanding the cognitive and emotional perspective of others or how to appropriately interpret social cues, instruction in perspective taking may be beneficial. There are many practical instructional strategies that may promote the development of empathy skills. Basic recognition of emotions in others can be facilitated by presenting pictures of different facial expressions with the corresponding emotional labels captioned. Students may take turns being a "detective" and using physical cues or "clues" to help them interpret others' emotions more accurately (Merrell et al., 2007). Students may also play a form of "feelings charades" during which a student and/or the teacher acts out an emotion and the students take turns identifying the target emotion by the physical clues. Teachers can also engage students in activities where different individuals take on play-like roles to act out different perceptions and reactions to the same scenario. Then, a discussion can cover why individuals do not have the same response to the same situation. For example, a teacher could provide a realistic scenario to which students relate, such as the closing of a school. The objective is to illustrate how different individuals may feel very differently about the same situation. Adam may feel happy that the school is closing down because he is now able to attend the school his friends attend. Esmeralda may feel angry that the school is closing down because she can no longer ride her bike to school but will now need to ride a bus to the new school. Mr. Malik may feel sad that the school is closing down because he has worked for many years in the building and will miss it. This lesson can include differing perspectives from different cultures and can provide a foundation upon which to build the critical skill areas of respecting others and appreciating differences.

Social Problem Solving

Students with SLD are likely to experience difficulties in social problem solving skills, such as poorly developed conflict responses (e.g. fight or flight), and overly negative thinking patterns (Cohn, Meshbesher, & Teglasi, 2004). Conflict, and the stress and frustration it often accompanies, can be managed by the following the coping strategies previously described in conjunction with a problem solving model. An effective social problem solving model may include basic steps, such as: identify the conflict; brainstorm solution ideas; identify a mutually agreeable solution; and make an agreement (Merrell et al., 2007). To curtail overly negative thought patterns, teachers can provide opportunities for students to practice more optimistic and rational methods of approaching problems. Situations similar to the following could be discussed: "During a group activity, Larissa disagreed with Jamar's idea. Jamar could interpret this situation by thinking one of the following: (a) Larissa does not like me, (b) Larissa doesn't think I have good ideas, or (c) Larissa disagrees with this idea. Which of Jamar's thoughts is most likely or most rational?"

Skills Maintenance and Generalization

SEL instruction may produce initial gains within the instructional setting, but for skills to maintain and generalize, a concerted effort must be made. When skills have been explicitly taught and rehearsed in the instructional setting, educators should plan to encourage the demonstration of skills over time in different settings and contexts. Educators can precorrect students by reviewing expectations or anticipated difficulties that students might encounter, remind students of acquired skills by providing prompts and opportunities to practice skills, and reinforce successful skill implementation (Langland, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 1998; Sugai, Bullis, & Cumblad, 1997). For example, prior to administering a test, Ms. Kwan precorrects by proactively reminding her students to use the mental and physical relaxation techniques they have previously learned. During the test, Ms. Kwan may notice a student appearing quite distressed; at this point, she reminds this student in the moment to use the physical and mental relaxation techniques. Finally, if Ms. Kwan observes a student using the relaxation techniques (e.g. breathing deeply) she reinforces this student via behavior-specific praise or other class-wide or school-wide rewards. To increase the effectiveness of the interventions, teachers should inform both teaching and support staff of these SEL efforts so they can also precorrect, remind, and reinforce specific skills in other classrooms and in non-classroom settings such as hallways, cafeterias, and playgrounds. Additionally, students may benefit from "booster lessons" where critical skills are re-taught after a period of time or when needed.

Selecting SEL Programs

Whether an SEL program is developed at the local level or a packaged program is purchased, general recommendations apply for successful implementation. First, students tend to acquire social and emotional skills in a comparable manner to which academic skills are acquired. In fact, social, emotional, and behavioral skills may be as cognitive or brain-based as literacy and mathematics (Bar-On, Tranel, Denburg, & Bechara, 2003). Therefore, when implementing SEL programs, it is important that instructors incorporate instructional methodologies found to be most effective for students with SLD. Evidence-based methodologies include explicit instruction, skill modeling, rehearsal, and frequent feedback (Elias, 2004; Kavale & Mostert, 2004).

Educators now have a relatively wide selection of SEL programs for teaching skills within the school setting; unfortunately, the implementation of SEL programs is a challenging feat for American educators due to the academic demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, time constraints, and limited resources. Most American school systems, strapped for time and money, need effective and feasible SEL programs. Programs may be more feasible if they require relatively little preparation time and do not necessitate mental health expertise to implement with fidelity. Programs that follow predictable

formatting may help establish structure and routine for students and allow instructors to devote more attention to students' learning, rather than instructional design and delivery. The examples and scenarios within each lesson, however, should be modifiable to allow the use of examples or scenarios that accurately represent students' cultural experiences and developmental levels. The most effective SEL programs tend to be behavioral or cognitive-behavioral. Programs that merely provide information or instructions are unlikely to significantly impact the SEL of students (Durlak & Wells, 1997; Tobler et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2001). Effective SEL programs must be interactive, incorporating opportunities for prosocial peer interaction. Prosocial peer relationships contribute to children's behavioral and emotional adjustment, and this is particularly true for students with SLD. Structured opportunities for cooperative peer interaction can provide students with multiple opportunities to practice SEL skills and thereby facilitate the development of positive peer relationships.

Some examples of research validated SEL programs include: Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS; http://www.channing-bete.com/prevention-programs/paths), Check and Connect (http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect), and Second Step (http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp). For more comprehensive guides to SEL programs, the reader is referred to Zins and colleagues (2007), CASEL (2003), and O'Brien, Weissberg, and Shriver (2003). Examples of centers, institutes, and projects which contain additional SEL resources include Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL; www.casel.org), the Center for School Mental Health at UCLA (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu.offcampus. lib.washington.edu), the Project for Social and Emotional Learning (www.tc.columbia.edu/academic/psel), the United States Department of Health and Human Resources Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA; www.samhse.gov), and the Oregon Resiliency Project (http://orp.uoregon.edu). For international SEL resources, the reader is referred to the following sites: Tribes TLC: A New Way of Learning and Being Together (www.tribes.com), Peace Works (www.peaceeducation.com), and Roots of Empathy (http://www.rootsofempathy.org).

Tips for Successful Implementation

It is important for instructors to anticipate and plan for common barriers to SEL program implementation. Educators commonly question how to find the necessary time to implement comprehensive SEL programs. Often, solutions are found in the more efficient use of existing minutes, collaboration with counselors and school psychologists, and restructuring student schedules to free a section of time for supplemental instruction. With many schools focusing exclusively on academic initiatives, it may be difficult to establish a sense of priority for SEL efforts. Although the number of educators who view SEL as an

educational priority is increasing, there still remain individuals that believe SEL skills are naturally acquired or "should be taught at home." Sadly, many students with SLD fail to develop positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills by implicit means. Leaders in the field of SEL contend that these skills must be explicitly taught in the manner that reading, writing, and math skills are taught (Ross et al., 2004). Therefore, it is important to build consensus among staff regarding the need for explicit instruction in this area.

SEL initiative efforts must be coordinated with other school-based, family, and community programs. Too often, SEL initiatives yield somewhat disappointing results due to efforts that are short-term and disjointed (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001; Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004; Zins et al., 2007). SEL instructional efforts should be coordinated with other school-based and community programs such as anti-bullying initiatives and substance abuse prevention programs. To further ensure the optimal maintenance and generalization of key skills, it is important to collaborate with families. Prior to the implementation of SEL instruction, it is necessary inform families via newsletters, meetings, or phone calls. Coordinated efforts that involve families may contribute to more culturally responsive programs increased outcomes.

Schools implementing SEL initiatives should draw upon existing resources and expertise within the district. If the district employs staff with expertise in social-emotional and/or behavioral areas, such as school psychologists, school counselors, special educators specializing in Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, and behavior support coaches, their support and collaboration is highly encouraged.

To ensure students are responding to SEL instruction, both formative and summative assessments are needed. Formative measures facilitate data driven instructional decisions while learning is taking place, and summative measures assess attained skills after learning has occurred. Formative measures may include curriculum-based assessments to assess content knowledge, direct observations of student behavior in classroom and nonclassroom settings, and daily self-monitoring point sheets. Measures that may be used in both a summative and formative manner may include parent, teacher, and student standardized, norm-referenced rating scales. Furthermore, teachers can help students set attainable yet ambitious SEL goals and assist them in developing a measurable action plan. Motivation and ownership can be facilitated by students charting their achievements and visually monitoring their own progress toward goals. If the student is of appropriate age and maturity, the student can present his or her strengths and areas in need of growth during progress meetings, such as the Individual Education Planning (IEP) meetings that are typically held annually in the United States.

Conclusion

In light of the considerable value of social and emotional skills on student school-based and life outcomes, researchers and educators have developed an increased appreciation of school-based SEL programs in the United States. These school-based programs may be of major importance for students with SLD, who have a propensity to struggle with key social and emotional skills, including emotional education, emotional expression, empathy, and social problem solving. When considering social and emotional learning programs that target such skill domains, programs should be selected that employ instructional methodologies found to be effective for students with learning disabilities. Moreover, educators must anticipate and plan for common barriers and draw upon research-based strategies. With the widespread implementation of social and emotional learning programs in American schools, educational systems across the United States can increase the likelihood that students with SLD will achieve meaningful positive school and life outcomes.

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