

We the People:
The Connection between Social and Emotional Learning and Life Skills within the American Educational Experience

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Abstract

Whether you consider the United States of America a melting pot, Mulligan stew, a conglomerate or mish mash, we are one nation. The authors hope and pray the Preamble to the Constitution provides a goal for each of us regardless of race, creed, ethnicity, or color. There must be a glue that we must agree upon that will hold use together. Each citizen thrives when they have social and emotional skills which are essentially life skills. This article hopes to present those common knowledge, skills, and abilities and provide suggestions on how individuals, families, children, schools, and communities can provide an education rich in social and emotional life skills that enhances America's educational experience.

Introduction

Our country of the United States of America was founded in beliefs, laws, religion, tradition, values. individual, family, tribe, country. Today every initiative we take on must consider understanding different types of family structures, cross-cultural issues that teachers need to be aware of and building strong family school/ community relationships. So, what do you want your child to be when they grow up? This question is not about what job you want them to have. This question is directed at the kind of person your child will grow up to be. The article assumes that all parents want their kids to grow up to be responsible, law-abiding citizens that do well in school, work hard, and are successful. Just as a kid must be taught to tie their shoes, read, write, and solve math problems, so too must they be guided to develop qualities of character that are valued by their families and the communities in which they live (Ward, & Gillett, 2022; Sorbet & Notar 2022c). The founding fathers of this country had a vision. We see it in the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.(National Constitution Center, 2024).

The Preamble to the Constitution was brought forth by our forefathers and grounded in the ideals that the people of the United States share a common vision. The fundamental values of virtue, morality, and civility that are common to Americans are found in the *Bill of Rights*. Once in this country our ancestors built this nation to become what it is today. People from all over the world still look to the United States as a country of opportunity and many still dream to come here to live.

As a parent in our country, we are the first teachers of life skills and we bring our own life experiences to raising a child. We have established or experienced morays, mores, conventions, laws, values, traditions, heritage, and conduct of others. What have we learned from these experiences? What do we teach our children is right or wrong? What skills do we teach our child to be able to deal with these experiences? (Sorbet & Notar 2022c).

Condoleezza Rice says it best on the need for life skill, “The essence of America – that which really unites us – is not ethnicity or nationality or religion. It is an idea, and what an idea it is: That you can come from humble circumstances and do great things. That it doesn’t matter where you came from, but where you are going” (Kiszia, 2022). With the basis of this article centered around the idea that a parent will nurture and teach their child the knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve the values and goals they set forth, the authors believe that basic to growing a child is life skills (Sorbet & Notar, 2022c). No matter a family’s race, ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic status, every family has both aspirations and concerns for their children's success.

Have you ever heard these words of wisdom: Mind your manners. Work hard. Be grateful/ thankful for what you have. Be Helpful. Stop fussing. Look after yourself. Say you’re sorry and forgive your brother/sister. Respect your mother, father, aunts/uncles/grandparents, elders, people of authority. Act your age (maturity). Be Patient. Cherish the moment (Sorbet & Notar, 2022c). All these words of wisdom require skills. Life skills. What are these life skills that have sustained and maintained the heritage, strength, and desire that has built a nation of many (Sorbet & Notar, 2022c)? Here are some questions that parents could ask to verify if their children today are gaining life skills:

- Are they usually in a positive mood?
- Do they listen and follow directions?
- Do they have close relationships with caregivers and peers?
- Do they care about friends and show interest in others?
- Do they recognize, label, and manage their own emotions?
- Do they understand others’ emotions and show empathy?
- Do they express wishes and preferences clearly?
- Do they gain access to ongoing play and group activities?
- Can they play, negotiate, and compromise with others? (Ho, & Funk, 2018)

Regardless of whether you were raised in a single parent home, two parent home, or extended family home, each had their own dynamic. Families are the foundation from which teachers build their students' voice, agency, and academic development. Without this understanding, the most well-intentioned efforts can fall short of establishing authentic partnership with families (Woolf, 2022). Being raised you were aware of decisions being made, whether they were good or bad, love, hate, friendship relations, and learned how familiar people interacted or “got along.” You saw parents or caregivers who were or were not involved and supportive. Parents or guardians are thought to be the first educators in their family for the children. Parents and guardians are the first to teach life skills to their children. You may have witnessed financial concerns, anxiety and stress, and hopefully seen and experienced resiliency (Sorbet & Notar, 2022c). How all these concerns throughout life are addressed individually through utilizing life skills. All the people in these situations had some degree of life skills.

This article is focused on developing life skills through the teachings of social and emotional learning. SEL and life skills share commonalities such as emotional intelligence, socio-emotional learning, or social-emotional literacy, resilience, well-being, and self-care (Clark, 2023; Transforming Education, 2020).

Life Skills

Life skills can be defined as the skillset that enables humans to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of life. They may also be called psychosocial skills, as they are psychological in nature and include thinking and behavioral processes. Others define life skills as behavioral, cognitive, or interpersonal skills that enable individuals to succeed in various areas of life (Hodge, Danish, & Martin, 2013).

What are the essential life skills?

Essential life skills are broad abilities that one can improve over time through conscious effort that deal with one's sense of self, sense of others, and cognitive abilities. Of course, these skills overlap, with each of them aiding and supporting the others.

There may also be other life skills and there may be subcategories of life skills within each of these basic life skill types (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). The basic life skills are communication skills, coping skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision-making, emotional intelligence (EQ) skills, empathy, interpersonal skills, problem solving, money management skills, self-awareness, and stress management (Anderson, 2022; CASEL, 2019b; Davis, 2022; Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017)

Life skills provide the behaviors that enable individuals to adapt and deal effectively with the demands and challenges of life. There is a Nigerian proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” that means an entire community of people must interact with children for those children to grow in a safe and healthy environment (Osmond, 2023). This article looks at that “village” and how they share in the education of a child’s learning their life skills.

Social and emotional learning skills are included in our emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI or EQ for "emotional quotient") is the ability to recognize /perceive, interpret, understand, demonstrate, control/regulate, evaluate, and use your emotions to communicate with others effectively and constructively. Emotional intelligence is also essential to understand, diagnose/interpret, and respond or react to the emotions of others. It involves being aware of emotions in oneself and others and using this awareness to guide thinking and behavior. Having a higher level of emotional intelligence allows one to empathize with others, communicate effectively, and be both self and socially aware. Strong emotional intelligence can equate to having necessary life skills.

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) Skills

There are four different levels of emotional intelligence including emotional perception, emotional reasoning, emotional understanding, and managing emotions. Perceiving emotions is understanding emotions accurately. Such as understanding nonverbal signals such as body language and facial expressions. Reasoning with emotions requires thinking and cognitive activity. Emotions help prioritize what we pay attention and react to; we respond emotionally to things that garner our attention. Understanding emotions is understanding a wide variety of meanings. If someone is expressing angry emotions, the observer must interpret the cause of the person's anger and what it could mean. Managing emotions is regulating emotions and responding appropriately as well as responding to the emotions of others (Cherry, 2023; HelpGuide. 2024; Psychology Today, 2024).

There are benefits of having good solid emotional intelligence skills and they can assist you in many life experiences. Emotional intelligence allows you to be a more effective leader. Emotional intelligence can aid in better understanding how others are feeling and allows you to communicate with them. Emotional intelligence can help you become more aware of what you are feeling and allows you to understand yourself more deeply. Strong emotional intelligence allows awareness of your own emotions which also allows you to develop your self-control abilities and managing your emotions effectively allows you to exert greater control in situations marked by stress or conflict. Increased emotional intelligence enhances one’s life skills.

Some experts suggest that emotional intelligence is more important than IQ for success in life. IQ accounts for only about 20% of success in life, with the remaining 80% being made up by other factors, emotional intelligence included. Kids and young adults need emotional intelligence and social-emotional skills to be successful at school, home, and for the rest of their lives. These are the life skills that help kids build confidence, understand their own strengths and weaknesses, collaborate with others, navigate social situations, develop strong relationships, make better decisions, and being comfortable in your own skin, dealing with emotions effectively and knowing who you are (Cherry, 2023a; Cherry, 2023b; Frothingham, 2023; Goleman, 2021; Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017; Scully, 2018).

Interpersonal/Social/People skills

Interpersonal communication involves the face-to-face exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions between two or more people. This includes both verbal and nonverbal elements of personal interaction. Interpersonal skills are traits you rely on when you interact and communicate with others. They cover a variety of scenarios where communication and cooperation are essential and involve the ability to communicate and build relationships with others. Some people are born with inherent interpersonal skills, but everyone can learn, develop, and improve them. Some examples of these types of life skills are the ability to easily adapt, actively listen, provide consultation, be able to cooperate, exhibit cultural competence and dependability, show empathy, express appreciation and flexibility, exhibit leadership, be motivated, have patience, be able to resolve disputes, be responsible, show sensitivity to nonverbal cues, exemplify teamwork, and have tolerance (Drew, 2023; Herrity, 2023; Tarver, 2023).

Self-awareness

Self-Awareness is simply the ability to be aware of one's inner life—one's emotions, thoughts, behaviors, values, preferences, goals, strengths, challenges. It is the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a “growth mindset.”(Moran, 2023b). Social skills such as self-awareness involve knowing how to develop healthy relationships, how to have the ability to understand your own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behaviors in different contexts, such as home or school. This includes being able to recognize your strengths and limitations (Mind in the Making, 2023b). Self-awareness is also seen as one of CASEL's 5 competencies (CASEL, 2024a).

Decision-making

Decision-making is the act of choosing between two or more courses of action. Decisions are based on your values, beliefs and goals. Decision-making involves defining a problem, determining the requirements of an effective solution, establishing the goals of the decision, and identifying alternatives (Center for management & Organization Effectiveness, 2023.; Fülöp, 2005; Skills You Need, 2023a). Responsible-decision making is also seen as one of CASEL's 5 competencies (CASEL, 2024a).

Empathy

Empathy is awareness of and sensitivity to the feelings and emotions of other people with acceptance and understanding of others' diverse perspectives and experiences. Empathy is our ability to understand and share the feelings of another. When you are empathetic, you put yourself in another person's shoes and you attempt to see the world from their perspective. Empathy is understanding what others are experiencing *as if we were feeling it ourselves*. Empathy goes far beyond sympathy, which might be considered ‘feeling for’ someone. Empathy requires face-to-face interactions, meaningful discussion, and reflection to recognize, sense/understand the intentions of someone. Developing empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately by experiencing another person's point of view, rather than just one's own, and enables prosocial or helping behaviors that come from within, rather than being forced (Greater Good Magazine, 2023; Psychology Today, 2023; SkillsYouNeed, 2023b).

Communication Skills

Communication skills include the ability to listen and communicate a message clearly, either in written or spoken form, is one of the most critical life skills for kids. Communication enables us to pass information to other people, and to understand what is said to us where both the sender and receiver feel satisfied. The process is the exchanging of ideas, thoughts, opinions, knowledge, and data so that the message is received and understood with clarity and purpose. This exchange occurs in many forms, including verbal (using voice)and non-verbal, written (using printed or digital media such as books, magazines, websites, or emails), visually (using logos, maps, charts, or graphs) or non-verbally (using body language, gestures and the tone and pitch of voice), and listening. Communication can occur in person, on the internet (on forums, social media, and websites), over the phone (through apps, calls, and video), or by mail. In practice, communication is often a combination of several of these. The exchange is most effective when it is clear, correct, complete, concise, and compassionate. Communication is best when we use common, everyday words, use “you” and other pronouns, use the active voice, and use short sentences (Coursera Staff, 2023; Rowan, 2003; SkillsYouNeed, 2023).

Coping Skills

Coping skills are the thoughts and behaviors that help you tolerate, minimize, and manage stressful situations. The two types of coping skills we know of are problem-based and emotional. Problem-based coping skills focus on changing the situation so you have some control over it and that will help you solve the problem or minimize it. Emotional coping skills help you feel better, but they don't change your situation. They are centered on changing how you feel to help you manage your reaction to the situation. Knowing which approach is right for a specific situation can help you deal with stress more effectively. (Morin, 2023). Coping usually involves adjusting to or tolerating negative events or realities while you try to keep your positive self-image and emotional equilibrium. Managing your stress well can help you feel better physically and psychologically and impact your ability to perform your best. Resiliency in the face of stress is another key life skill (Cleveland Clinic, 2023; Marks, 2021; Morin, 2023a).

Creative thinking

Creative thinking is the ability to look at a problem in many ways. Creative thinking is the capacity to understand a problem and to redefine it, generate many kinds of new ideas, manipulate ideas in unusual ways, using materials in unique ways, and make unconventional connections to outline novel possibilities that have the potential to meet a given purpose. It is the ability to discover certain patterns of information and make abstract connections between unrelated data while ignoring existing boundaries to find new solutions. Skills required for critical thinking include analytical thinking, and open-mindedness. This life skill is at the heart of learning: figuring out what's the same, what's different, and sorting them into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity and moves children beyond knowing information to using information well. The author believes everyone can be creative when placed in the proper situation (Birt, 2023; Kim, 2006; Mind in the Making, 2023b;.Ramalingam, et al, 2020; Scholastic, 2023; Smart, 2021).

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking continued to be put forward as a central goal of education in the early 21st century. Its ubiquity in the language of education policy. This skill helps you analyze and evaluate information to guide your beliefs, decisions, and actions. You need critical thinking to make sense of the world around you and to solve problems. Critical thinking encompasses both a set of logical skills that can be taught and a disposition toward reflective open inquiry. Critical thinking is a process of objective and specific thinking about a subject or idea without allowing feelings or opinions to affect you. Critical thinking skills involves reflective, unbiased questioning, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and judging the information that you read, hear, say, or write and generating, and implementing a solution, and assessing the success of the plan (Cosner, 2023; Doyle, 2022; Eoghan, 2023; Huitt, 1998; Kimball, 2019; Mind in the Making, 2023a; Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017).

Problem Solving

Problem solving is defined as a thinking process where we use our knowledge, skills, and understanding to manage an unfamiliar situation. But keep in mind that problem solving is not like an algorithm. A problem simple enough to be solved with a series of "IF-THEN" statements (as is done in an algorithm) has no need for the life skill of problem solving. When it comes to the human mind, it is capable of much more complex problem solving (Carson, 2007; Notar, 2024).

According to Poyla (1945) problem solving is an important intellectual trait, as well as an essential aspect of human character, that can be learned by imitation or investigation. Problem solving is a measure of one's capacity to assess situations and analyze important information required to reach a solution (Ashman, 2019). Problem solving is a process through which problems are identified and solved through a repetitive process of systematically applying skills and strategies to arrive at a desired solution. Efficiently identifying the underlying issue in a timely manner and implementing a solution is a necessary skill across all content areas/jobs where problems are defined and resolved systematically and efficiently. Developing problem-solving skills requires a teaching and learning process in which speed in the acquisition of new knowledge is combined with respect for age and the developmental stage of the problem solver. The process is self-directed and involves the generation of solutions.

Money Management Skills

Finance is a broad subject, and it can get overwhelming along the way. While people tend to think of finance in terms of money, finance is about more than cash. While money is a legal tender used for many financial transactions, finance refers banking, leverage or debt, credit, capital markets, asset allocation, money, investments, and developing a cash flow, forecast for your business, keeping money in a high-interest savings account, and creating budgets and financial models (Berry-Johnson, 2023; Burk, 2023; Ramsey Solutions, 2023; Vaidya, 2023).

Finance is how an individual or an organization manages its financial resources in terms for matters regarding the management, creation, and study of money and investments. It involves the use of credit and debt, securities, spending, investing, borrowing, lending, budgeting, saving, and forecasting (Berry-Johnson, 2023; Ramsey Solutions, 2023; Vaidya, 2023). Hampton University (2023) defines finance as money management and the process of acquiring needed funds. Finance also encompasses the oversight, creation, and study of money, banking, credit, investments, assets, and liabilities that make up financial systems.

Personal finance is very specific to everyone's unique financial setting depending on their annual earnings or salaries, living requirements and expenses, goals, and lifestyle preferences. This requires you to manage, save, and invest one's money (Berry-Johnson, 2023; Kenton, 2022; Vaidya, 2023). Personal finance is managing an individual's monetary resources across five key areas: Income, savings, investments, spending decisions, and asset protection. A personal financial system involves generational wealth transfer, taking advantage of tax planning opportunities, filing tax returns, using credit cards, and buying, selling, and managing assets. All these activities require budgeting, saving, investing, and strategizing tailored to one's specific needs in the short, medium, or long term given a person's current financial constraints and abilities (Berry-Johnson, 2023; Burk, 2023; Hampton University, 2023; Kenton, 2022; Ramsey Solutions, 2023; Vaidya, 2023).

The authors see finance in the simplest of terms as having a dollar, how did you make it, how will you budget, save, spend, and grow it. Parents and teachers should equip children with personal financial skills from an early age. Introduce them to the fundamentals of working, budgeting, saving, investing, charity, debt, and taxes (Notar, 2023). Ramsey Solutions (2023) provides some percentages regarding where citizens are today in personal finance:

- 78% of Americans feel like they live paycheck to paycheck.
- 1 in 4 workers never save any money from month to month.
- 36% of Americans said they wouldn't be able to cover a \$400 emergency.
- 62% of college graduates in 2019 owed an average of \$28,950 in student loans.

The lack of knowledge can affect everything from how much you save — whether for emergencies or the long term (i.e., retirement) — to how much debt you take on and under what terms. Some important financial decisions can emerge before you reach adulthood or soon after. To name just a few: managing a credit card or auto loan, boosting your credit score, paying taxes, and starting to save for retirement despite it being decades away.

Stress management

Stress management is defined as the tools, strategies, or techniques that reduce stress and reduce the negative impacts stress has on your mental or physical well-being (Davis, 2023). Stress management offers a range of strategies to limit stress to help you better deal with stress and difficulty (adversity) in your life. Managing stress can help you lead a more balanced, healthier life. Stress is an automatic physical, mental and emotional response to a challenging event (Mayo Clinic, 2023). Stress management is a method of learning its effects and learning ways of behaving and thinking that reduce it. The use of specific techniques, strategies, or programs—such as relaxation training, anticipation of stress reactions, and breathing techniques—for dealing with stress-inducing situations and the state of being stressed. (Davis, 2023).

Now that we know what life skills are, what comprises the “village” their responsibilities, interactions, and ideas to help impart those responsibilities? The village includes parent/family, parent/school, parent/school/community, parent/community, school, school/community, and community.

For this “village” to work, first and foremost, it requires SEL skills. At last count there were 86 SEL programs that emphasize K-12 student social and emotional learning. How can we encourage the instruction of social and emotional learning to enhance life skills within our children's' educational experience in our country?

Through time the vision of our forefathers has been changed, lost by many. Several of our country's leaders have spoken about that loss of sight. There are many issues that are inhibiting the full implementation of social and emotional learning and life skills lessons in our country's educational experience for it's youth. These issues or concerns are preventing us from reconnecting with our founding father's core beliefs of what our nation was founded upon.

Why are WE not WE

Existential crisis

Existential crisis refers to the ensemble of feelings and questions we have to do with the meaning and purpose of our life. These questions aren't easy to find answers to, and this can leave us feeling stuck (Roncero, 2021). Existential in simple terms has to do with human existence ... the ensemble of feelings and questions we have to do with the meaning and purpose of our life. (Roncero, 2021).

Poverty

Children in poverty in America is persistent, structural, and solvable, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only made it clearer that the existing structures to address child poverty and protect children from hardship are inadequate. Policies that tie basic living standards to a narrow definition of work and exclude families with the lowest incomes only serve to exacerbate the negative impacts of living in poverty—but it doesn't have to be that way (Haider, 2021).

Education and Training

The authors approach to SEL is that it is not another thing to put on educators' plates, but that it IS the plate. It is the basis from which we deliver academic content as an integral part of social, emotional, and academic learning. (Aspen Institute, 2023; Greenberg, 2023; Merrill, , et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Adults in education are usually content-knowledgeable within their own discipline. The difference with SEL is that most adults haven't taken courses in emotional intelligence or engaged in activities intentionally designed to strengthen their own social-emotional skills (Hood, & Antonelli, 2023). This produces a disconnect and makes it much harder to implement, as many teachers and leaders do not feel efficacious about the content themselves, let alone their capacity to model it, encourage it, deliver it to others. Teachers need a broad set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in action to integrate SEL into their content.

Teacher's perceptions of self-efficacy

Lack of preparation has led to teachers feeling of not being qualified to teach SEL. Teachers play a vital role in shaping their students' perhaps influencing their SEL behaviors more than even their parents. Therefore, educators must be practiced, prepared, and well-informed, with a keen understanding of the SEL world and its many facets. Lack of preparation, inadequate resources, lack of administrative support, and professional development are valid reasons for teacher's perceptions of self-efficacy.

Lack of preparation

The number one reason cited by many who have influence in the decision for teaching SEL is we don't have enough well-trained teachers to teach SEL. Because educators are the main facilitators of SEL curricula, it is imperative that they possess adequate content knowledge in this subject. Teachers were concerned with their content knowledge being understandable and wanting additional training when asked to implement a SEL curriculum,

There is no room in the curriculum or lack of time

Another impediment is the argument that there is no room in the curriculum. K-12 education requirements are set by states. Curriculum and graduation requirements take precedence over social and emotional learning.

Inadequate resources (money, training, curriculum, teacher supplies, etc.)

Not all the problems can be solved by the educators themselves. Education is up to the states, not the feds, and each state has different ideas of what a SEL program proper resources are required. If you do not know what is needed, how do you budget for it is one argument with another problem being "you do it", but there is no money attached to the mandate.

Lack of administrative support

The most prominent reason is that educators have not recognized the need to SEL until now. SEL education core skills are seen as needed to succeed in our modern world. Wonderful! As an administrator you look at all the impediments listed by the authors and shake your head.

Developmentally inappropriate curricula

Teacher's perceptions of self-efficacy were mentioned earlier. One reason is a general failure of the education system to identify the most relevant skills students should possess. Two problems are developmentally inappropriate curricula and how do you teach SEL while understanding beliefs and attitudes, cultural and community values, and behaviors and sentiment SEL?

Other overall concerns

Other concerns include what are the appropriate levels of literacy, education, and knowledge on SEL topics introduction, cost, and source of the resources through which this knowledge can be applied, and what/how do you teach a dynamic, increasingly complex, and constantly evolving life – personally, professionally, and financially SEL in the ongoing divisive political climate? (American University, (2020; Committee for Children, 2023; Datnow, et al., 2022; Education Week, 2021; Positive Action, 2021; Ruggirello, 2021).

The Connection between Social and Emotional Learning and Life Skills within the American Educational Experience

To assure that America's youth are gaining social and emotional learning skills required of them to be best prepared in today's world, educators are being tasked to assume the responsibility to teach these skills. Long ago perhaps these life skills fell onto the shoulders of families to teach them to their children and were also upheld by schools, but today that may not be the case. Teachers alone may be providing first-time lessons within the five competencies of Social and Emotional Learning and assuring that our youth have the skills they need to be emotionally intelligent. CASEL the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning shares the definition of social and emotional learning which is defined as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2024a).

There are five competencies of CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning Framework. The five competencies are: self-awareness, responsible decision making, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills (www.casel.org). Social-emotional learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (Greater Good in Education, 2023).

Self-awareness is defined by CASEL as the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts and values and how those influence behaviors. Responsible decision making is defined as the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings. Social awareness is the abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Self-management includes the abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. Relationship skills are the abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL, 2024b).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) launched initiatives to push states and districts to adopt SEL. Since 2016, participation has grown "from eight states to more than 30 states and one U.S. territory, collectively representing more than 11,850 school districts, 67,000 schools, 2 million teachers and 35 million students, preschool to high school" (CASEL, 2019a). Today, all 50 U.S. states have SEL standards/competencies for preschool, 11 states have extended preschool standards to early elementary, and 18 states have standards for K-12.

Building Social and Emotional Learning Skills to enhance Life Skills within Schools

Promoting social and emotional development for all students in classrooms involves teaching and modeling social and emotional skills, providing opportunities for students to practice and hone those skills, and giving students an opportunity to apply these skills in various situations. One of the most prevalent SEL approaches involves training teachers to deliver explicit lessons that teach social and emotional skills, then finding opportunities for students to reinforce their use throughout the day. Another curricular approach embeds SEL instruction into content areas such as English language arts, social studies, or math (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Yoder, 2013; Zins et al., 2004). There are a number of research based SEL programs that enhance students' competence and behavior in developmentally appropriate ways from preschool through high school (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013, 2015).

Teachers can also naturally foster skills in students through their interpersonal and student-centered instructional interactions throughout the school day. Adult-student interactions support SEL when they result in positive student-teacher relationships, enable teachers to model social-emotional competencies for students, and promote student engagement (Williford & Sanger Wolcott, 2015). Teacher practices that provide students with emotional support and create opportunities for students' voice, autonomy, and mastery experiences promote student engagement in the educational process.

How Schools Can Support SEL

At the school level, SEL strategies typically come in the form of policies, practices, or structures related to climate and student support services (Meyers et al., in press). Safe and positive school climates and cultures positively affect academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). School leaders play a critical role in fostering schoolwide activities and policies that promote positive school environments, such as establishing a team to address the building climate; adult modeling of social and emotional competence; and developing clear norms, values, and expectations for students and staff members. These SEL-centered, schoolwide activities foster strong practices in developing life skills.

Fair and equitable discipline policies as well as practices that help to prevent bullying are more effective than purely behavioral methods that rely on reward or punishment (Bear et al., 2015). School leaders can organize activities that build positive relationships and a sense of community among students through structures such as regularly scheduled morning meetings or advisories that provide students with opportunities to connect with each other. An important component of schoolwide SEL involves integration into multi-tiered systems of support. The services provided to students by professionals such as counselors, social workers, and psychologists should align with universal efforts in the classroom and building. Often through small-group work, student support professionals reinforce and supplement classroom-based instruction for students who need early intervention or more intensive treatment.

Building Family and Community Partnerships to Foster SEL

SEL can also be fostered in many settings other than school. SEL begins in early childhood, so family and early childcare settings are important (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015). Higher education settings also have the potential to promote SEL (Conley, 2015). Family and community partnerships can strengthen the impact of school approaches to extending learning into the home and neighborhood. Community members and organizations can support classroom and school efforts, especially by providing students with additional opportunities to refine and apply various SEL skills (Catalano et al., 2004).

After-school activities also provide opportunities for students to connect with supportive adults and peers (Gullotta, 2015). They are a great venue to help youth develop and apply new skills and personal talents. Research has shown that after-school programs focused on social and emotional development can significantly enhance student self-perceptions, school connectedness, positive social behaviors, school grades, and achievement test scores, while reducing problem behaviors (Durlak et al., 2010). Undoubtedly, enthusiasm about social and emotional learning (SEL) has grown dramatically since the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the federal education law that allows states to use one nonacademic measure for accountability, in addition to the required academic measures (Zhao, 2020).

SEL and Politics

There is tremendous political will to bring SEL to schools, as evidenced by the more than 200 pieces of legislation referencing SEL introduced in 2019 alone (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020) (Zhao, 2020). The SEL movement has faced a wave of attacks over the last few years, and those attacks don't seem to be letting up. Critics have derided SEL as, for example, a "nonacademic common core" (Gorman, 2016); "the latest big education fad" (Robbins, 2016); a terrifying experiment in social engineering (Eden, 2019), and an "Orwellian idea" (Effrem, 2017). Writing in *Education Week*, Chester Finn (2017) equated SEL to the "self-esteem" movement, calling it a hoax, with roots in "faux psychology." (Zhao, 2020).

According to Kamenetz, (2017) SEL seems to be a catchall term, applied to just about anything that is “not directly measured by standardized tests,” such as grit, mindset, the 4Cs (creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration), habits of mind, and resilience. As other critics have noted, “Common terms for this set of skills include character education, personality, 21st-century skills, soft skills, and noncognitive skills, just to name a few” (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 3); Zhao, 2020).

Indeed, the current enthusiasm for SEL can be seen as a rejection of the previous movement to improve academic outcomes via test-driven accountability and centralized and standardized curriculum and assessment. Many in education saw these policies and practices as a panacea, too (Zhao, 2009, 2012), until it became clear that they were ineffective and had all sorts of adverse side effects (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, 2008; Zhao, 2018b). Zhao suggests that if SEL continues to be described as a grand, transformative movement, it may suffer the same fate (2020).

In a recent white paper, the Pioneer Institute urged policymakers to block SEL-related programs, warning that they could lead to the psychological manipulation of students, threats to their data privacy, “indoctrination,” and an “erosion of freedom of conscience via government-established SEL norms for the attitudes, values, and beliefs of freeborn American citizens” (Effrem & Robbins, 2019, p. 32). (Zhao, 2020). After two decades of education policy focused almost exclusively on students’ academic performance, they add, it has become widely recognized (thanks in large part to the research) that children’s social and emotional needs are just as important as their mastery of core content and skills (Zhao, 2020).

Is SEL Ideologically driven?

Another major point of contention over SEL is whether it is ideologically driven. Advocates say no. “In fact, the basis of this approach is not ideological at all,” maintains the NCSEAD report, for two reasons. First, the SEL movement is based on science: “It is rooted in the experience of teachers, parents, and students supported by the best educational research of the past few decades.” Second, SEL is driven by local actors, not top-down federal mandates: “It is based on the emerging consensus of successful communities, convinced that this is the missing piece in American education. It will only expand to scale on the strength of local ownership, promoting these efforts school by school, district by district, and state by state” (NCSEAD, 2019, p. 8; Zhao, 2020).

But to some critics, the SEL movement is rooted in the secular ideology of progressive education. For example, Kevin Ryan (2019), an emeritus professor of education at Boston University and founder of the Center for Character and Social Responsibility, argues: “The current popularity of [SEL] represents progressive education’s greatest victory in its 100-plus-year campaign to transform our public schools, and, thus, the nature of America itself” (p. 4). He explains:

SEL advocates see teaching students their five “competencies” of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as the effective replacement for schools’ former moral education and character formation. Committed as they are to development of “the whole child,” progressive educators are promoting these skills as a secular replacement for what parents used to instill in children according to their faith, and to cultural and family beliefs and values . . . [A]t its core, the skills of social-emotional learning aim to shift the center of moral decision-making from traditional wisdom and an awareness that we are children of God to the newly enlightened self (Ryan, 2019, p. 4; Zhao, 2020).

Of course, the dispute over whether SEL is ideological is pointless, given that all education is grounded values (Biesta, 2010). Educators cannot set ideology aside, whether it comes to arguments over what to teach in biology, history, literature, and civics classes; whether and what sort of sex education to provide, or whether to focus on SEL. Rather than trying to deny that advocates would be better off acknowledging their ideological positions and trying to make the strongest possible case for them (Zhao, 2020).

What we know that has not worked as we’ve seen throughout the standards and accountability movement, is an insistence on measuring all students against a single set of goals leads to individual and cultural differences being penalized, achievement gaps being created, and local traditions and creativity being suppressed. If all schools across diverse cultural populations are made to adhere to the very same SEL standards, then what damage could this cause? This type of one-size-fits-all approach could cause many other concerns. This could easily result in a rigid curriculum that causes the very kinds of stress, anxiety, and other social and emotional problems that SEL is supposed to address (Zhao, 2012; 2018a, 2018b).

It is imperative to teach the whole child and specially to attend to their full range of academic, social, and emotional needs, as well as their physical well-being. We welcome efforts to reduce K-12 education's emphasis on academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. It is dangerous to view SEL as a panacea for all educational ills, or to translate it into a set of uniform standards that all students are required to master (Zhao, 2012).

Impending Concerns Preventing SEL and Life Skill Education

There are several impediments that seem to get in the way of social and emotional themed lessons or curriculum that may encourage the teaching of life skills. These are: lack of teacher preparation or training, teacher's own perception of self-efficacy, no room in the curriculum, inadequate resources or funding, lack of administrative support, developmentally inappropriate curricula, and many other factors that seem to get in the way of teaching SEL. Life skills through social and emotional learning are foundational for success in school, the workplace, and life. To be successful and sustainable with students, life skills must start with the adults (CASEL, 2023a; Shafer, 2016). An increasing number of schools and districts across the globe are realizing the importance of life skills, but where do they fit in the curriculum? Life skills aren't separate from academics – the two go hand-in-hand (Harappa Education, 2021; Positive Action, 2023; Vegas, & Winthrop, 2020).

Conclusions

The world has changed. The culture of self has devalued relationships and left many of us poorly equipped to build quality human connections. Nationwide there is no unity of purpose, agreement on fundamental principles, and conflict resolution has moved toward violence. Society ... destroying ourselves from within.

Authentic human encounters develop meaningful relationships. They demand intentionality and mutual exchange. People are not being raised to the same standards. Homes are not providing morals, values, respect, basics of right and wrong, and responsibility and consequences.

We need to study history to see when there is not, We or US. When there is only I nothing good happens to the We and US. We can be different because most of us embrace liberty as a common good. The entirety of the American experiment in democratic self-government is realized by maximizing liberty in the context of an ordered society. This ordered society is dependent on its citizens to be ... cognizant and capable. A cognizant and capable citizen needs the life skills.

Learning life skills is the process through which children and adults understand and regulate emotions, set positive goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions on a developmentally appropriate continuum (PAVE, 2023).

Life skills build student success and improve school culture through better attendance, receiving better grades, having better behavior with less conduct problems, higher self-concept and more positive attitudes toward school and learning. Therefore, developing life skills is key not only to being successful in life, but it's also key for our health and well-being (Botvin & Griffin, 2004; Buckle, 2023; Cross, 2020; Flynn, 2017; Ho, & Funk, 2018; National University, 2023; New Jersey Department of Education, 2023; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023; Satchel Pulse, 2023; Staake, 2023; Weissberg, 2016).

Research suggests that developing life skills may help reduce drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. It may also reduce aggression and violence (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). In addition to these bigger outcomes, life skills can just make life a bit easier. When we can regulate our emotions effectively and develop enduring, supportive relationships, we're happier and healthier.

As the authors stated in the beginning of the paper, we are using the term life skills to explain the skills and differentiate from the many programs labeled Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). However, SEL is a common term in education, and the ideas and methods have been around for decades and has become part of the public consciousness and many schools are implementing initiatives with great success.

SEL is a holistic approach to building supportive communities for every child through social-emotional learning (American University, (2020; Committee for Children, 2023; Datnow, et al., 2022; Education Week, 2021). SEL encompasses the so-called "soft skills" of daily life providing students with resources and materials that support the development of good decision-making skills, managing their emotions, communicating with others, making smart choices which they can apply in various real-life scenarios (Positive Action, 2021). SEL provides students with resources and materials that support the development of good decision-making skills, (Positive Action, 2021).

SEL is dependent on collaboration between educators, families and community members working together to promote positive educational, behavioral, and social outcomes to understand each other's perspectives and to develop shared goals. When families and staff work together, they can exchange information and can focus on meeting each child's needs and supporting their development. Partnerships allow children to see important people in their lives working well together. (NASP, 2022).

Life skills must be a central part of education, using CASAL SEL is one way and the authors choice.

Final Thoughts

The Founding Fathers of our United States of America believed that our country should hold dear to its beliefs, laws, religion, tradition, values. individual, family, tribe, country. In a time where it is of utmost importance for children to grow up with the ability to have the life skills to adapt and understand their social environment and show empathy to each other while being able to regulate their own emotions, the authors believe that life skills and social and emotional learning go hand in hand. The authors believe that children should be provided with not only the content and curriculum of an excellent education but also have experience with the life skills that they need to be able to function in this ever-changing world as they encounter tasks that challenge their abilities to make responsible decisions, exhibit social and self-awareness, be able to manage oneself, and possess relationship skills. The future of "We" or our country's youth need to be able to tap into all the life skills and emotional intelligence that they can to be successful and to help to move our country forward.

Teaching moments are key to anything ... instances that are fresh in the mind of an individual are the time to ask why questions, what other solutions could you have chosen... They are everyday events. Children and adults alike benefit from positive familial relationships, which form the core of many people's social and emotional well-being (Positive Action, 2021). Social and emotional learning specifically tailored towards improving emotional skills in these relationships can help support parents in developing a closer bond with their children and foster a mutually positive relationship built on social and emotional awareness (Positive Action, 2021). Stronger social and emotional awareness leads to increased emotional intelligence and possibly improves one's life skills.

Read as a family and turn history into an engaging story for kids of all ages. Help children understand history more deeply by immersing them in the stories around the events of the day, challenging them to learn from the past and apply those ideas to show how they are relevant to us today. Teach the inspiring ideas of America's founding and how those ideas are relevant to their lives today. History provides examples of peace of mind, quality of life, safety, respect, and dignity which demonstrate life skills and social and emotional learning and are all part of every society.

Life skills are the body, mind, and spirit of We.

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