



Can You Teach Emotional Intelligence?

The Secretary of Education isn't the only one who thinks so. Behind the growing movement for social and emotional learning.

Katherine Gustafson, posted Jul 22, 2010

In a dimmed classroom in Spanish Harlem's P.S. 112, thirteen kindergarteners were on a journey through the Woods of Wonder. With teacher Tom Roepke they crossed over a bridge made of blocks to reach their base camp—the classroom's carpeted corner. As the traffic of FDR Drive rushed by outside the window, its sound mixing with a soft flute on the CD player, Roepke asked quietly if anyone saw anything interesting.

"I saw lots of seashells," whispered one boy.

"I saw a reindeer and an owl," said another. "They had black fur and they had super eyes that see in the dark and they could even see me in the dark. I put something on the floor and he ate it and he was happy."

"You fed the owl and he was happy," said Roepke. "I bet he's going to remember you! What did you see, Sophie?"

"I saw a little bird that was blue and had a flat beak and sharp claws."

"I saw a purple salamander," Sophie's neighbor offered.

"I've been hoping to see one of those!" Roepke exclaimed. "Every time I go in those woods. I haven't seen one yet. You are so lucky."

Soon enough it was time to build a cellophane campfire. The children each contributed a piece of kindling to the pile and blew it into flame, which Roepke provided with the flicker of a flashlight beneath the orange cellophane. After the students had toasted imaginary marshmallows and stretched out to sleep under the stars, the night watchman reported a passing bear.

"He just spotted it in the woods over there," Roepke told the class. "It's not coming over here. We're safe."

A Peaceful Place

In a neighborhood where safety is fragile, Roepke's all-clear was a statement about much more than a make-believe animal.

"Our kids need a peaceful place," the school's principal, Eileen Reiter, told me in her tidy office lined with baskets of children's books. "Our kids' lives are so chaotic, I can't even tell you. There are kids in foster care, or whose parents are in jail. I have a hundred million stories. So it has to be a place where kids can come and feel relaxed and feel safe and get a lot of support."

Support, in this case, means more than just academic training and a hot lunch. Reiter has embraced a philosophy known as social and emotional learning, called SEL by its proponents, that focuses on teaching children the skills and strategies to recognize and moderate their own emotions and to manage conflicts with others.

That's what Roepke's imaginative journeys are about. "We're in the middle of an imagination where some things are going to happen that might be a little exciting," he explained. "When we feel that, we're going to do the check-in. It's the beginnings of checking in with yourself, in the context of play. I couple the SEL ideas about self-regulation and self-calming with contemplative education, where there are moments of wonder, reverence, stillness, shared silence, looking at something beautiful together."

Empowering students with tools and techniques to calm themselves, observe the world, and exert positive pressure on their environments reduces the distraction caused by inner and outer turmoil, freeing kids up to concentrate more effectively on the rest of what they are learning. In this way, SEL not only helps enhance students' emotional wellbeing and maturity but also improves their academic achievement.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a group that advocates the widespread adoption of SEL instruction, students exposed to SEL see their scores on standardized achievement test scores rise by an average of 11 percentile points, compared to students who are not exposed. SEL-trained students also exhibit improvements in class behavior and a decrease in anxiety, depression, and other forms of emotional distress.

SEL strategies run the gamut from the imaginary journeys like those pioneered by Roepke to meditation practices, reflective exercises, and conflict-resolution techniques. In some schools, students learn how to mediate arguments between other kids and then practice the strategies in mock-conflict situations. They then teach these skills to students in younger grades, a tactic that helps them gain confidence and take ownership of the ideas.

Other SEL curricula include reflective writing exercises in which students complete and illustrate sentences such as "When I am sad I _____," a means of identifying and embracing strategies to manage their emotions. Students at P.S. 112 responded to that question with a wide range of constructive ideas, such as "play with my sister," "listen to music," and, "jump into a dream."

While SEL curricula have been around for years, used most heavily in private and independent schools, a movement to integrate the philosophy into public education is growing rapidly. Based on its success in public schools in a handful of states, including Alaska, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Kentucky, SEL is increasingly recognized as source of stability and positivity in an embattled educational universe.

"Our goal is to start a movement," said Timothy Shriver, chairman of CASEL's board of directors. "It's a movement dedicated to creating knowledgeable, responsible, and caring children and communities."

At a recent congressional hearing, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan agreed with Shriver's positive assessment of SEL's potential. "These are learned skills," he said. "Children can have huge challenges, but when you help them learn how to handle them, you have a chance ... If we are not addressing this, we're not in the game."

Some in Congress are moving to enthrone SEL in educational law. Representatives Dale Kildee (D-MI), Tim Ryan (D-OH), and Judy Biggert (R-IL) have introduced the Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Act of 2009, H.R. 4223, to the House of Representatives in an effort to get SEL standards included in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Ryan sees SEL as “a force multiplier” that has tremendous potential to inspire broad-based change. “You get the teachers, you get the parents, you get the students, you create an environment, you create a community, you create success, you create the kind of compassionate society that we all want,” he said at a forum organized by CASEL. “I’m completely on board.” He secured a grant to implement comprehensive SEL curricula in three school districts in his home state of Ohio.

That program, the most intentional large-scale implementation that the fledgling movement has yet had the opportunity to orchestrate, will involve a comprehensive evaluation plan to assess the program’s effectiveness on a number of indicators, including parent response. It will incorporate classes for parents to familiarize them the SEL tools their children are learning in school.

‘It’s Really, Really Working’

For the teachers of P.S. 112, teaching kids how to handle tough social and emotional situations has made a big difference.

“I’m telling you we have kids that can really be off the wall, that have really extreme behavioral issues,” Reiter told me. “I’m not kidding.”

“I think you could use the word explosive,” Roepke added.

Reiter nodded. “But you don’t see it. I have 13 special ed classes, out of 23,” said Reiter. “And you cannot tell.”

The class Roepke had been camping with is one of them. Elissa Spencer’s first-grade class, where eight of the 20 children have been labeled as special needs, is another. I watched as Spencer guided her students through a meditation exercise centered on breathing and body awareness.

“Just take a minute and close your eyes and ask yourself ‘how am I feeling right now?’” Spencer said to she and her students sat in a circle in the pale sunlight of a March morning. Her voice was soft and her gaze engaging as she looked from child to child. “What are the images in my mind? How does my body feel today? Does it feel stiff? Is it loose? Do you feel exhausted today? Are you glum? Or are you elated today? Let’s check in with ourselves and think about how we’re feeling today.”

The children were silent, some of them rubbing their temples as they considered these questions. Peace persisted as Spencer led them through a breathing exercise that used the idea of “smelling the cake” and “blowing out the candles” to inspire deep inhales and exhales, and then instructed them to lay head-to-toe on the carpet to do a guided muscle relaxation meditation.

The value of getting students to understand and deal with their own emotions cannot be overstated. Studies show that students in SEL programs not only perform better on achievement tests, but also have significantly fewer suspensions and expulsions, better school attendance, higher grades, and decreased prevalence of high-risk behaviors such as violence and drug and alcohol use. Additionally, multiple studies show that students who develop emotional bonds with their classmates and with teachers who have high expectations adopt a positive attitude toward academic achievement, learning, and school in general. Students in SEL training also exhibit less disruptive behavior and a greater ability to concentrate in the classroom.

Reiter reports that the program, which has also included lessons in managing emotions for teachers, is having a “major, major impact” on them, as well. “During the day now, they’re using a lot of the stress reduction strategies

that they learned,” she said, tools that can save a teacher’s sanity in a situation where “the possibility of burning out is just gigantic.”

But what’s most important, she says, is that “for the kids, it’s really, really working.”