

**American Education Research Association (AERA)
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)
Special Interest Group (SIG) Address**

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**April 16, 2009
San Diego, California**

I am very grateful to be asked to speak to this group, especially as I believe that the vision most of us have for bringing the dimension of SEL to the forefront in education today has the potential of not only reforming education as we know it, but also *transforming* the way we relate to teaching and learning.

I am also very honored to share this time with my colleague Linda Darling Hammond who has inspired me for decades to keep my eyes on the prize of what schools could be for students, teachers, administrators, families and the communities they serve. Thank you Linda for carrying on all these years.

Many of you in this room are probably connected to the work of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). How many of you are on the CASEL list-serve?

I have had the privilege of being part of CASEL's development from our very grassroots beginnings when a small group of us in a room were deliberating what we should call this "missing piece" in education through to witnessing the influence our hard work has had over the past decade. We have been able to shine a light on what solid research is telling us about how critical the SEL dimension is to schooling and the future success and well being of us all.

As I reflect on how far this field has come – that there is an SEL SIG at AERA, and it looks like over 100 people are attending this meeting - I'd like to complicate our thinking a bit in terms of the role those of us who care about SEL need to play. As we advocate and work toward the integration of SEL as a basic part of curriculum frameworks in k-12 instruction, and as it becomes a key part of teacher preparation and professional development of teachers, there are some things to keep in mind.

For example, how do we make sure our vision of change is wide and deep enough to dismantle the things we are still doing in the name of caring about how we educate our children that are not serving the children and teachers we want to help?

So what would this mean? Since September 11, 2001, when I was asked by the New York City Schools and several foundations to help the schools in and around Ground Zero heal and recover from this tragedy, I have had a much deeper respect for how important it is to work with teachers. Firstly, we need to help strengthen their own SEL skills before we encourage them to make these ways of being integral to what they do with their students. Those of us in the SEL field know that research tells us that direct, sequential instruction of SEL skills to students using a researched based curriculum that is developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive is

important. However, we also need to remember that what ultimately has the most impact in our classrooms is the quality of interaction between the teacher who is teaching this curriculum and the student who is learning it.

So, I have a renewed sense that we can't sacrifice developing a teacher's own self awareness and self management skills because we feel that it is more important for them to become skillful in SEL implementation in the classroom. Teachers need to first build their own reservoir of inner resilience – the place in them that gives their work meaning and purpose. Teachers and administrators need to experience being part of a living community of learning with their peers in which they are engaged and first grow themselves in the very things we want them to be giving our children. We need to remember that schools are about educating students, teachers, and families all at the same time.

Every time we help a group of adults get in touch with their own inner source of reflection, it becomes easier for them to align their inner guidance with their outer reality. And it is when this kind of reflection happens within the context of a community of learners, that there is the potential of allowing personal insights to be a source of social change in their classrooms and schools. The kind of reflection and self awareness work I am talking about is when we are able to create a community of adult learners who are able to take the time to be introspective but never lose the sense that they are connected to each other. This kind of community needs to have, as Parker Palmer calls it, “unconditional regard for one another”. Then there is the possibility of mutual inspiration.

When we pay enough attention to growing and cultivating our own self-awareness and management of our emotions first, we find that it often puts us in what Sir Ken Robinson calls a “meta-state” in which our intuition is sharper, ideas come more quickly and we become in the flow. For the teacher, teaching becomes more relaxed and the teacher becomes the instrument of their own expression of teaching. I think we all know when we feel “in the zone” – this feeling of course is the opposite of feeling burned out. It is as if we have more energy than we even need.

So as we grow our movement, we may need to think about where we are putting the emphasis in terms of professional development. Most of the time when we innovate in education, we think about curriculum and assessment. And we are doing that as well with the SEL field. There's nothing wrong with this, except if we don't pay attention to the process part – the teaching and the teacher – I would have to say that we are in trouble because it is still by far the best way to improve education.

I am a little concerned for example that some of the ways we are thinking about what will change the quality of our schools don't fall into the pedagogy category at all. Some of the silver bullets I am hearing about are:

- charter schools that are not part of unions and often displace neighborhood children
- teacher pay incentives and firing teachers at poorly testing schools
- open access of the military to our schools and students
- PBIS replacing the need for SEL

So we in the SEL movement have our work cut out.

Also, I know many of us, including myself, connect SEL skills to what young people need in the business world. But remember we can go overboard with this, as if business knows better than educators what our children need to know and be ready to do. I hope we feel that teaching SEL skills is doing a whole lot more than preparing young people for the world of work. We are also preparing young people to live healthy, engaged lives as active citizens in a democracy which honors diversity and helps them have the kinds of skills to tackle the tough questions of life with deep meaning and purpose.

So we've got to also make sure that the SEL curricula are relevant to young people. Remember we are competing with nearly 45 hours per week a child in the US spends with some form of media – mostly television and screen-based media - to about 30 hours a week in school.

We know that solid SEL instruction involves applying skills to the real world, but we have to go even further than that. Most of the time when we teach SEL skills, we connect them to the part of the real world that is predictable. However, the world that our young people are inheriting is as much unpredictable as it is predictable. And often kids don't know what to do when they are faced with applying these skills in an unexpected situation. What we teach in SEL and how we teach it has got to have depth so that these competencies stand up in the wide contexts in which young people will need to use them.

For example, we could talk about teaching young people the kinds of decision-making skills that would be the specific proficiency acceptable to the business world or we could teach them the kind of decision-making skills that would allow them to ask the kinds of questions that would encourage them to actively engage in issues around equity and social justice. And remember, there are so many changes happening at this very moment – particularly in our advances in technology – that we can only guess what the future will be like and what competencies young people will need to be successful. My guess would be that SEL skills will be, without a doubt, the ones that remain on the list.

I do believe that the SEL movement has incredible potential for helping schools transform themselves if we are willing to have a wider vision about what we are trying to do. A focus on SEL can bind a school together in a common cause. It can make school a place that we would all want to come to and work hard to improve. A focus on SEL could help us make schools more democratic. They could serve as examples of what our larger society is capable of. If we are willing to complicate our thinking a bit in growing this movement, I am hopeful that we have a good chance of transformation, which is a lot harder and will take a lot longer than school reform.

It requires each of us to hold on to our vision in the paradox of what the reality is. It is believing that we can make the impossible possible and the exception the norm. We are not alone in this vision and we need to keep up each other's hope and faith that it can be done.

I hope this week and tonight is helping each one of us to recommit to this vision. I would like to end by sharing a poem entitled, "What Teachers Make" by Taylor Mali and adapted a bit by me.

What Teachers Make

Taylor Mali*

He says the problem with teachers is "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?" He reminds the other dinner guests that it's true what they say: Those who can, do; those who can't teach.

I decide to bite my tongue instead of his and resist the temptation to remind the dinner guests that it's also true what they say about lawyers.

Because we're eating, after all, and this is polite company. "I mean, you're a teacher," he says. Be honest. What do you make?

And I wish he hadn't done that (asked me to be honest) because, you see, I have a policy about honesty: if you ask for it, I have to let you have it.

You want to know what I make?

I make kids feel better about themselves than they ever thought they could.
I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional Medal of Honor...

I make parents see their children for who they are and what they can be.

You want to know what I make?

I make kids wonder.
I make them question.
I make them come in touch with their feelings.
I make them apologize.
I make them see their inner beauty.
I make them reflect, reflect, reflect ...

I make them understand that if you got brains then you follow your heart and if someone tries to judge you by what you make...

Let me break it down for you, so you know what I say is true: I make a difference! What about you?

* Adapted by Linda Lantieri for the Guidance Counselors in the 911 Recovery Program