

## **Social and Emotional Learning – An Idea Whose Time Has Come** **by Linda Lantieri**

A strong public demand is arising in public schools in the United States to implement effective educational approaches that promote not only academic success but adequately prepare young people to lead us into the next decade. In fact, a growing body of research suggests that helping children develop good social and emotional skills early in life makes a big difference in their long-term health and well-being. In his groundbreaking book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (1998), Daniel Goleman identified EQ – emotional intelligence – as being as important as IQ in terms of children’s healthy development and future life success. He writes (1998, 19):

*Given how much emphasis schools and admissions tests put on it, IQ alone explains surprisingly little of achievement in work or life. When IQ test scores are correlated with how well people perform in their careers, the highest estimate of how much difference IQ accounts for is about 25 percent (Hunter & Schmidt 1984; Schmidt & Hunter 1981). A careful analysis though, suggests a more accurate figure may be no higher than 10 percent, and perhaps as low as 4 percent (Sternberg 1996).*

Goleman’s work has helped us understand the importance of emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective use of one’s IQ. Brain science tells us that a young person’s brain goes through major growth that does not end until the mid-twenties. Neuroplasticity, as scientists call it, means that the sculpting of the brain’s circuitry during this period of growth depends to a great degree on a child’s daily experiences. Environmental influences on brain development are particularly powerful in shaping a young person’s social and emotional neural circuits. Teachers are beginning to equip young people with the skills to be aware of and regulate their emotions more effectively. They are teaching students regular mindfulness practices that seek to strengthen the brain circuits that can strengthen self awareness and emotional regulation. (Lantieri 2008, 10)

We, as the adults in children’s lives, can’t keep telling young people to “calm down” or “pay attention” without providing them with some practical guidelines for how to do so. By offering young people systematic practice that help them become more self aware, pay attention and relax their bodies, we can help them cultivate their budding capacities by developing the neural pathways that strengthen positive traits such as compassion and empathy. Teaching these mindfulness practices to students can increase not only their social and emotional skills, but their resilience: the capacity to not only cope, but thrive in the face of adversity.

The exciting news is that The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act (HR 4223) was introduced in December, 2009 by Congressman Dale E. Kildee (D- MI), Congresswoman Judy Biggert (R-IL) and Congressman Tim Ryan (D-OH). These leaders are now working to include this legislation in the bipartisan overhaul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). HR 4223 authorizes the US Department of Education to: Reach more young people with evidence-based social and emotional learning as a regular part of their school day; measure and broadly share the results of these efforts; and support teachers, school districts and states to implement SEL.

A window of opportunity exists right now in society for these kinds of approaches to make their way into homes and schools. It is essential for children to learn new ways to have their spirits uplifted and their inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their growing up experience. Our task as educators who are preparing young people to be citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to make sure that not only is no child “left behind” but that no *part* of the child is left behind—that every aspect of being human is welcomed into our schools. Becoming a citizen ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires a change in consciousness. Our best hope for humanity is to fully engage young people with the realities of our time in ways that interest and inspire them to understand themselves, others, and the interdependent world in which they live; to come to love and believe in justice and peace; and to take active steps in their own lives to bring about a better world. And as Gandhi prompted, “We have to start with the children.”

*References:*

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