

How to Integrate Social-Emotional Learning into Common Core

By Vicki Zakrzewski | January 22, 2014 | 1 Comment

Implementing the Common Core doesn't mean educators have to abandon SEL—in fact, just the opposite might be true.

Do the Common Core State Standards undermine social-emotional learning?

Many educators think so. In a recent Ed Week op-ed, an elementary principal argued that teachers were too busy teaching Common Core to address the social-emotional development of their students. I've heard the same argument from many teachers. This is troubling given that researchers strongly suggest that the learning process is 50 percent social-emotional and 50 percent cognitive.



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Yet when I read through the Standards, I quickly realized that social-emotional skills are implicitly embedded in the Standards—whether or not teachers, school leaders, policy-makers, or even the creators of the Common Core realize it.

In other words, for students to successfully meet the Standards, they must possess social-emotional skills. And unless students magically come to school with all these skills in place, deliberate teaching of these skills will be necessary.

(For readers who are not familiar with the current U.S. public education landscape, the Common Core State Standards outline what students are supposed to know in language arts and math at each grade level so that they will be prepared for college and/or the workplace. While 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Standards, there is still much disagreement on how to implement and test them and whether they're appropriate at all.)

Predicting if the Common Core Standards will survive the multitudinous controversies currently raging in state legislatures is beyond my psychic abilities. But there are hundreds of thousands of educators striving to put the standards to work in classrooms—and it's

worth exploring how the Standards naturally align with CASEL's framework of social-emotional learning outcomes. Here are some examples.

Common Core Math Standards and SEL

At first, math and social-emotional learning may not seem like natural allies. But if you think back to a time when a mathematical concept completely confounded you (like, ahem, proofs in high school geometry), social-emotional skills such as perseverance, hope, optimism, and asking for help would have come in handy.

The Common Core Standards for Mathematical Practice outline "processes and proficiencies" that math teachers should help students develop. These qualities, in particular, align well with social-emotional learning. Here are a couple examples:

Common Core Math Standard:

Students make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.

Corresponding SEL "self-management" skills:

- Possess self-efficacy
- Work toward goals
- Attention control
- Manage personal stress
- Regulate emotions such as impulses, aggression, and self-destructive behavior
- Seek help when needed
- Exhibit positive motivation, hope, and optimism
- Display grit, determination, or perseverance

Problem-solving (particularly word problems) is for many students the most challenging part of math. Often students will take one look at a problem and decide that it's too hard without even trying—especially those with "math phobia." This is where social-emotional skills can help.

Students need to first trust in their ability to solve a problem (self-efficacy) and then work towards that goal. They must be able to focus on the problem rather than get distracted by what the kid on the other side of the room is doing. If they get stuck, students must manage their stress-levels by regulating their emotions and, if necessary, ask for help. Staying optimistic throughout the process will help them persevere to the end.

For example, before beginning a lesson, have the students practice a couple minutes of mindfulness. Research suggests that this will calm their emotions and focus their attention. For longer-term impact, help students see how their personal goals align with math outcomes. Scientists have found that this will help students develop hope—one of the most important factors in student academic success. [Click here for specific science-based suggestions on cultivating hope in students.](#)

Common Core Math Standard:

When constructing viable arguments, students justify their conclusions, communicate them to others, and respond to the arguments of others.

Corresponding SEL "social awareness" and "relationship management" skills:

- Respect others (e.g., listen carefully and accurately)
- Understand other points of view and perspectives
- Identify social cues (verbal, physical) to determine how others feel
- Predict others' feelings and reactions
- Manage and express emotions in relationships, respecting diverse viewpoints

Emotions can run high when students try to defend their point—which can all too often lead to hurt feelings. Educators need to teach students how to transform "you're wrong!" or "that's a stupid answer!" into "from my perspective" or "I respectfully disagree."

Creating a caring and safe classroom builds respect among students. They learn to understand and accept that other people have different perspectives than them. Educators who build students' emotional literacy by teaching them how to identify emotions in themselves and others are giving students the tools to predict how others' feel and then respond appropriately—all of which will lead to much more effective (not to mention fun and engaging) academic discussions.

One of my favorite examples for building a safe and caring classroom comes from a Greater Good Summer Institute for Educators participant and is based on the RULER program. At the beginning of the year, she asked students how they wanted to feel in the classroom. After getting over their initial shock that a teacher actually cared about how they felt, students began to say things like "be respected" and "no laughing at each other."

Everyday, the students and teacher started class with everyone stating how they were currently feeling. Anyone who felt out-of-sorts was given a little bit of time to visit the "balancing table" where he or she could draw, write, or practice mindfulness to feel better. While many teachers may feel this practice would take too much time, in the long-run, the benefits far outweigh the time factor. Multiple studies show that students who are part of a safe and caring classroom where they feel seen, heard, and respected have better peer relationships and are more successful academically.

Common Core and English Language Arts Standards

Many SEL programs such as PATHS and RULER already use writing and literature as part of their lessons. And research indicates that reading literary fiction can help develop empathy—a wonderful justification for English teachers to assign more books like *Crime and Punishment* and *Heart of Darkness*.

While not explicitly calling them “social-emotional skills”, many of the Common Core Language Arts Standards give teachers the opportunity to incorporate mini-lessons on emotions, communication, relationships, and other social-emotional skills directly into their language arts curriculum. Here are a couple examples:

Common Core English Language Arts Standard

RL.3.3 Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

Corresponding SEL “self-awareness”, “social awareness”, and “responsible decision-making” skills:

- Label and recognize own and others’ emotions
- Analyze emotions and how they affect others
- Evaluate others’ emotional reactions
- Reflect on how current choices affect future

In order to identify feelings of other people—whether real or fictional—students need to have a well-developed emotion vocabulary. Being able to recognize and label these emotions as they occur within themselves helps students do so in others. Examining how emotions impact fictional characters’ lives also provides a non-threatening opportunity for students to reflect how emotions affect their own lives and the people around them.

For example, have students create a double-entry journal to examine how the emotions of a character impact the world around him or her. Follow this up with a journal entry in which students self-reflect on their own emotional experiences. To make it easier for students to label emotions, hang an emotions poster in your classroom.

Common Core English Language Arts Standard

W.7.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources.

Corresponding SEL “relationship management” skills

- Exhibit cooperative learning and working toward group goals
- Communicate effectively
- Cultivate relationships with those who can be resources when help is needed
- Provide help to those who need it
- Demonstrate leadership skills when necessary, being assertive and persuasive
- Prevent interpersonal conflict, but manage and resolve it when it does occur

Anyone who has ever had to collaborate on a group project for school knows that it’s not exactly a bed of roses. Pulling one’s own weight (and getting others to do so), agreeing to

disagree, and compromise are all part of the process—but social-emotional skills can go a long way in smoothing the road for everyone.

Effective and respectful communication is key to collaboration, as well as motivating and helping each other along the way. Students who develop these kinds of skills in school will be considered the “cream of the crop” when it comes to future workplace success.

For example, rather than telling students your version of good teamwork, have them come up with their own rubric for evaluating their collaborative efforts. This will help them “own” the process and make them more accountable to each other. Then have students share with the class after each workgroup session what worked and what didn’t. Ask them to role play possible solutions for any problems they might have encountered. Allow them to adjust their rubric as they gain deeper insight into what makes a good team.

What’s Missing

Overall, I found the Common Core Standards provide an excellent excuse for the teaching of social-emotional skills. And I applaud teachers who make the effort to do so. But even then, there’s still something missing.

No Standard and no SEL program can replace a teacher’s enthusiasm and passion for the curricula being taught. To me, that is the magic of teaching—and what often separates the good teachers from the great ones. The truly gifted educators are those who care for their students and show them the “awesomeness” of the world around them—and then go the extra mile to help them find their unique and purposeful place in it.

http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_integrate_social_emotional_learning_into_common_core#