Social-Emotional Learning and Academics

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Today’s schools are being held accountable for their students’ ability to pass standardized academic tests. But as a social institution that reaches nearly all children, they are also expected to produce students who are prepared for citizenship and the workplace, possessed of strong character, able to steer clear of drugs and delinquency, and capable of building healthy relationships with peers and adults. Do schools have to make the painful choice between preparing students to meet rigorous academic standards or preparing them to be responsible and successful adults? Does investing school resources in teaching students social and emotional skills take away from the goal of ensuring students succeed academically? Or are academic achievement and well-rounded development inextricably linked, each essential to the success of the other?

Fortunately, the social-emotional skills and supportive environments youth need for healthy development are also crucial for academic success. Students achieve academic success in part through their ability to get along with peers and teachers, manage their emotions, focus their attention, follow instructions, and avoid risky behaviors. Schools can simultaneously increase academic achievement and reduce violence, delinquency, drug abuse, and other youth problems by providing students with the developmental support they need to get along with others, try hard in school, and stay out of trouble. Moreover, these gains are mutually reinforcing; children who do well in school are less likely to engage in problem behaviors, and children who avoid these problems do better in school. Bringing all students up to high levels of academic achievement requires intellectual, social, and emotional development.

Social-Emotional Competence and School Success

Children need academic skills to succeed in school. However, to build those skills, they need to be able to successfully participate in and benefit from classroom instruction. Some of the key academic enablers that form the bridge between instruction and learning are interpersonal skills, motivation, and the ability to focus and engage successfully in class. These social and emotional competencies have been shown to increase academic achievement (DiPerna & Elliott, 1999), and the levels of these skills have been found to be lower among academically at-risk students (Elliott, DiPerna, Mroch, & Lang, 2004).
Social, emotional, and cognitive development are interdependent (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005), and twenty years of research has shown that children need a strong foundation of social and emotional competence to succeed in school (Raver, 2002). Students who are socially and emotionally skilled earn higher GPAs (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O’Neal, 2001; Wentzel, 1993) and score higher on standardized tests (Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Teo, Carlson, Mathieu, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1996; Wentzel, 1993).

The effects of students’ verbal ability on their academic competence has been shown to be dependent on their knowledge of their own and others’ emotions (Izard et al., 2001). In fact, students’ academic achievement is predicted at least as well by their early interpersonal skills as by their intellectual abilities. Researchers found that students’ academic achievement in eighth grade could be predicted by their ability to empathize, cooperate, help others, and share in third grade (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). These third-grade prosocial behaviors actually predicted eighth-grade achievement better than academic achievement in third grade. Another long-term study found that students’ early peer competence and emotional health predicted their scores on standardized achievement tests in both sixth grade and at age 16, over and above the effects of their earlier cognitive ability (Teo et al., 1996).

Social and Emotional Competence and Peers
Socially competent children and youth reap tremendous benefits from their ability to make friends and get along with peers and adults. Students who are socially and emotionally competent have more friends and more connections with positive peers, and are less likely to be rejected, isolated, or bullied. Students who are bullied have lower academic achievement and poorer school attendance (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003; Slee, 1994), use more alcohol and drugs (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, & Henderson, 2002), are more likely to bring weapons to school (Berthold & Hoover, 2000), have lower self-esteem, and feel more lonely and anxious (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Children with friends are both happier and more successful in school (Guay, Boivin, & Hodges, 1999; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999); they get in less trouble, have better grades and higher test scores, and are more involved in school activities (Berndt & Keefe, 1995).

Social and Emotional Competence and Teacher Support
Socially competent children and youth get along better with their teachers, who tend to like them and provide them with more support (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Wentzel, 2003). Students who are liked by teachers are more likely to have positive school-related goals (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Supportive relationships with teachers help students do well in school (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Raver, 2002) and decrease the likelihood of their involvement in cigarette smoking, getting drunk, using marijuana, suicidal ideation or attempt, early first sexual intercourse, and weapons-related violence (McNeely & Falci, 2004). All teachers strive to have high regard for every student, but children who lack social and emotional competence can be hard to teach.

The Power of School Connectedness
Social and emotional competence leads to improved relationships with teachers and peers. The result is increased school connectedness (Wilson, 2004), which is a powerful support for academic success and protects students from health-compromising behaviors. Students who are bonded to school have higher levels of academic achievement, behave better in school, and are less likely to repeat a grade (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). They are more motivated for academic success and more engaged in class (“Wingspread,” 2004). School connectedness is also stronger for students in organized and well-managed classrooms where they feel supported and respected (McNeely & Falci, 2004), but effective classroom management is an easier task for teachers with socially and emotionally competent students.

The ability to form positive connections with teachers and staff and engage with school can also make the difference in whether students stay in school long enough to finish (Rumberger, 2001). Only 68% of all public school students in the U.S. graduate from high school, and African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students are as likely to drop out as to receive a high school diploma (Swanson, 2004). While fewer than one third of dropouts leave because of difficulty with school work (Hymel & Ford, 2003), half leave school because they don’t get along with teachers and other students (Lee & Burkam, 2001). When 40–60% of students are “chronically disengaged” (“Wingspread,” 2004), the ability of students to connect with teachers is critically important. The “most important finding” of one large study of dropouts was that students from poor and disadvantaged families and neighborhoods are likely to stay in school when they have positive interactions with teachers and school staff (Lee & Burkam, 2001).
The power of school connectedness vividly illustrates how young people’s school and life success are interwoven. Greater connection to school keeps youth safe and out of trouble and increases school achievement and graduation rates. Feeling connected to teachers protects students from the influence of antisocial peers (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Students who are connected to school are less likely to use alcohol and illegal drugs, engage in violent or deviant behavior, become pregnant, experience emotional distress (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Wilson, 2004), or commit school violence (“Wingspread,” 2004). School connectedness has powerful protective effects that last. Students who are more bonded to school in the elementary grades are less likely to become serious criminals or join a gang in middle school, and less likely to drink, smoke, or have a drinking problem by age 21 (Catalano et al., 2004).

Boosting Academic Achievement While Preventing Problems
Can schools really support the development of the social and emotional competence so critical to academic and life success? The clear answer is yes. Millions in federal grant funds have been spent over the last 20 years to support the development and testing of school-based programs for youth. As a result, a wide variety of effective programs are now available. The work of synthesizing the research to determine what is most effective has been done, and lists are available to guide educators to the programs that work (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Much of the development of these programs has been focused on the prevention of drug abuse, violence, and delinquency. Fortunately, what it takes to help children and youth avoid these problems is also a very important part of what it takes to support academic achievement. Research has shown that one of the most effective ways to prevent youth problems is to develop youths’ social and emotional competence (Gottfredson & Wilson, 2003).

Programs that effectively reduce violence and drug abuse have also been shown to increase school success. One study of 163 school-based prevention programs found that programs that focused on social and emotional learning reduced delinquency and substance abuse, but were even more effective at reducing truancy and dropout rates (Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001). A comprehensive review of the impact of prevention programs on school outcomes (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2002) found that effective programs resulted in improved standardized test scores; higher GPAs; increased reading, math, and writing skills; improved graduation rates; and increased credits earned. Effective prevention programs not only increased academic outcomes, they also improved attendance; decreased dropout rates; increased parental involvement in school; and reduced suspensions, grade retentions, special education referrals, and school behavioral incidents.

Conclusion
School and life success for students are not separable goals. One of the most powerful links between the two is social-emotional competence. Students who can manage their emotions and behavior and form positive relationships with peers and adults do better in school and avoid health-compromising behaviors. Effective programs are available to help teachers and schools build their students’ social-emotional skills. Rather than taking time and energy away from the pursuit of academic success, social-emotional learning supports academic achievement by helping students focus and behave in the classroom and build bonds to school through improved relations with peers and staff. Teaching social-emotional skills supports the mission of schools to produce students who are academically and socially successful, and is a critical component in the education of the whole child.
References


