

Social and emotional learning in the school library

By Carol A. Gordon

Snapshot

Dr Carol Gordon explores social and emotional learning (SEL) and the role of the school library in building skills in this area, and as a safe place. Gordon also considers a framework within which to consider SEL.

I have no doubt that the survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence, as it does on the development of technical knowledge and skills. Most educators believe that the development of the whole child is an essential responsibility of schools, and this belief is what has motivated them to enter the profession. (Linda Darling-Hammond, 2015)

Introduction

Students like Susan, Brian, and Graham demonstrate their need for social and emotional learning every day.

Susan, aged 6, puts her head on the desk as soon as the bell rings at the start of class. She fails to complete her work and stares into space or looks out the window during the lesson. She often leaves her seat without permission and asks for bathroom or water breaks.

Brian, aged 12, teases and makes fun of his peers and sometimes makes verbal threats. He often makes comments to encourage other students to misbehave. He uses inappropriate language with peers and is increasingly absent from school.

Graham, aged 16, is chronically absent from school. He is often high on the weekends and is failing most of his courses. He has three brothers and two sisters and his father is often absent from the home. His mother works during the evenings to make ends meet.

These behaviours are often considered a nuisance or disruption rather than symptoms of social and emotional dysfunction that inhibits learning. Educators and researchers also observe positive emotions that are not always identified as desired learning outcomes of intentional and planned instruction. In an interview in KQED News (Schwartz, 2013) neuroscientist Immordino-Yang commented on the role of positive emotions in learning: 'Help kids know how to make meaning and sense of what they are learning so they can see who they are ... Creativity is just an extension of that.' To illustrate this point Schwartz (2013) noted:

(Immordino-Yang) talked about her young daughter who wrote a song about loving her young brother ... the imagery in the song incorporated space, planets, and the galaxy.

She had just learned about those concepts, but in order to really understand their significance, she needed to express them within the totally understood and emotional space of family love. Allowing kids the space for the interplay between the emotional and cognitive spaces will benefit the long-term learning.

In another interview Immordino-Young (Sparks, 2016) commented on the role of emotion in cognition.

People think of emotion getting in the way of cognition, but it doesn't. Emotion steers our thinking; it's the rudder that directs our mind and organizes what we need to do. ... When thinking is devoid of emotion you don't remember ... or think deeply. ... In a classroom context that means students who feel no meaningful emotional connection to the material they learn will have a harder time both remembering and applying ... (the material).

Despite over one hundred years of research and reflection, practice does not align with what we know about the role of negative and positive emotions in teaching and learning.

What the research tells us

Educational philosophers and psychologists Dewey (1910), Piaget (1926), Vygotsky (1930) and Bruner (1960) built a strong foundational body of constructivist theory that identified affective dimensions of learning and their relationship to cognition. However, social and emotional competencies are not taught explicitly or systematically, nor are they formatively assessed. Such an approach marginalizes anti-social behavior, addiction, and poverty so they are not seen as causal factors of poor academic performance. Similarly, research on motivation (Small & Arnone 2000), self-efficacy (Bandura 1966), and affective dimensions of reading development (Guthrie, et al. 2007), for example, is stored in disciplinary silos of psychology, education, sociology, neuroscience, information science, or literacy research. As a result teaching practice may not include a lesson in empathy when teaching the Jewish Holocaust or instruction on collaboration when students work in literature circles. These are missed opportunities to develop social and emotional competencies for all learners within curricular contexts.

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A definition for emotional intelligence emerged in the literature when Salovey and Mayer (1990) coined the term, defining it as

... a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action.

They developed a framework (fig. 1) that identified four competencies: Recognizing emotions; Understanding emotions; Regulating emotions; and Using emotions.

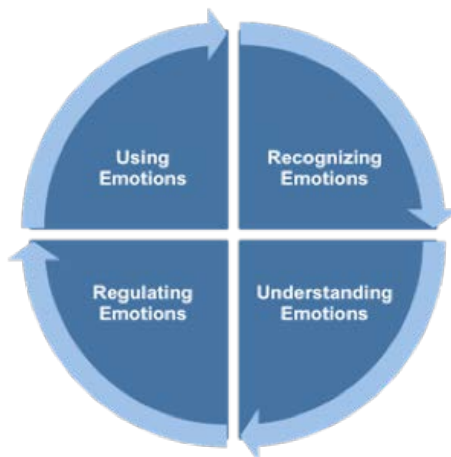


Fig. 1. Framework for emotional intelligence, Salovey & Mayer, 1990

Research-based frameworks such as this can bridge the gap between research and practice. In this case, fig. 1 focuses on emotions with no reference to social learning. We can infer cognitive processes are involved in using, recognizing, regulating, and understanding but context for learning is not explicit.

Daniel Goleman (2006), a trained psychologist, science writer, and researcher, addressed the failure of traditional tests of cognitive intelligence to explain why some people are successful in life and others are not. In so doing, Goleman paved the way for educators to develop curriculum that included *social and emotional learning* (SEL). In addition, research by Humphrey et. al. (2011) expanded the definition of SEL: 'The process through which individuals learn and apply a set of *social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills* required to succeed in *schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship.*'

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning provided a comprehensive definition of SEL that finally acknowledge context:

... the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, 2019)

This definition informed a more comprehensive SEL framework (fig.2).



Fig. 2. A Framework for social and emotional learning, CASEL, 2017

At the center of the framework are SEL goals that are the explicit learning outcomes of SEL instruction in schools: Self-Awareness; Self-Management; Responsible Decision-Making; Relationship Skills; and Social Awareness. These outcomes can be observed and formatively assessed for progress, and in so doing they generate feedback for the learner and inform future instruction.

On the periphery above and below learning outcomes are contexts in which SEL teaching operates. At the bottom of the framework are the cultural contexts: Curriculum and Instruction; School-wide practices and policies; and Family and Community Partnerships.

Curriculum and instruction. The learning outcomes are guided by the framework and realized in the context of curriculum development and the statement of learning objectives to be attained through instruction or intervention.

School-wide practices and policies. Classroom practices include grading and rules for behavior. Disciplinary protocols are often school policy that drives school culture. Practices and policies operate within school culture and they can either help or hinder the development and implementation of an SEL curriculum.

Family and community partnerships. The learning outcomes of SEL flow from the CASEL definition of SEL, i.e., Self-Awareness; Self-Management; Responsible Decision-Making; Relationship Skills; and Social Awareness. Family and community history, beliefs, social status, income, parenting styles, and many other factors that make up cultural context influence the kind of social and emotional learning that takes place. Partnerships are needed so that family and community participation and support are inclusive and fair.

Homes and Communities, Classrooms, and Schools. At the top of the framework are the literal contexts, or places where SEL instruction takes place.

Why school libraries are well-suited to social and emotional learning

The CASEL framework illustrates what research tells us: SEL skills and learning outcomes are context dependent (Bronfenbrenner & Morris. 1998), so what does a good context for SEL learning look like? In the CASEL framework schools and classrooms are designated contexts for SEL instruction. However, school libraries are not represented in the framework yet there is strong evidence they may be optimum contexts for social and emotional learning.

Research reveals significant data about the development of negative and positive emotions generated through traditional classroom teaching. Researchers tracked 520 students in 31 schools from the beginning of 2nd grade through the end of 4th grade. (Murayama, et al., 2013) They recorded the students' levels of enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom in math classes, as well as their end-of-year math-achievement levels. They found that the emotional pattern gets

increasingly negative over the school years. Enjoyment drops throughout elementary school years, and negative emotions increase. Each of these emotions created a feedback loop with academic achievement. For example, student math anxiety in 2nd grade was more likely to have lower math achievement at the end of the year, which made it more likely the student would

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be even more anxious in 3rd grade, again increasing the risk of even lower math performance. This cycle persisted throughout the elementary grades. Boredom produced a negative cycle, and enjoyment in math in the lower grades created a positive feedback cycle.

Research strongly indicates that SEL skills could be central to understanding and remediating persistent gaps in achievement defined by income and racial/ethnic differences. To this end, school libraries are committed to the concept of equitable access to resources and services for all students. While it is possible, and even desirable, to incorporate SEL in academic curricula and classroom methodology, school library values and culture are particularly well suited to SEL. A study of school libraries in New Jersey (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011) describes how school libraries help students learn. These data reveal many ways school libraries provide a supportive environment for social and emotional learning. The researchers interviewed focus groups in 13 elementary, middle, and high schools. Focus groups were comprised of principals, teachers, and school librarians. The participants expressed a range of observations about the work of their school librarians and the kinds of learning that takes place in their school libraries, including the development of social learning, interpersonal skills, emotional growth, and the acquisition of knowledge, all of which are important for living and working outside of school.

... learning that takes place in their school libraries, including the development of social learning, interpersonal skills, emotional growth ...

General comments established how teaching and learning in the school library is different from classroom learning.

'Kids come to the library for specific assignments but they end up being together in a learning situation that's a little freer than a classroom situation, where there's a little bit of buzz going around, ... it's a very welcoming environment. There is a lot of diversity in here: There are a lot of different learning styles going on, a lot of different activities ...' (Fifth Grade Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 60)

The school library values support digital equity and equitable access to school library resources and services to all learners.

'And you could level the playing field. If the library is open kids have access to information, the community has access to find what they can't readily get anywhere else, especially when there are receptive people working in the library, and that helps even more because the information is coming for free. (Special Education Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 127)

School libraries are a safe place

The notion of the school library as a safe place was identified in all of the focus groups in 13 schools. 'Safe' was interpreted from a range of perspectives.

'School library culture is a safe haven, ideal for those students who exhibit social and emotional needs: A place where students can engage with information knowing that they can get individual guidance; a place where they can explore diverse topics, even controversial topics, in privacy and without interruption; a place where they know information they access is trustworthy; a place where they can retreat and work without interruption and intervention by other students without any kind of threat; a place where they can obtain individual mentoring as needed without any kind of judgment.' (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 124)

.. the school library as a safe place ...

'And it's a place where they are safe to ask questions.' (Special Education Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 82)

School libraries motivate students to learn

'Our library is also used after school hours for at-risk students to support their needs and learning. I think students learn to become self-reflective and they become self-motivated to enter the library and use what they've learned to do it on their own ... Even though you have a resource [person] who directs you to where you need to go, you still need to be motivated to go there, to listen, to internalize directions, so [the school library] fosters life skills ... (School Librarian) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 93)

One of the most important things is that the students learn that it's their right to have access to information ... there is a lot of education about banned books ... our librarians want (students) to be able to put their hands on whatever they want to in terms of what they [want to] read. It's their right to read. (English Coordinator) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, pp. 118-119)

(The school library) encourages kids and helps them build self-esteem. (Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p 121)

I think that having the (school library) ...is confidence building. (Fifth Grade Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 122)

School librarians develop empathy in students through their teaching. (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p.123)

The school library develops social skills

The [school library] library model over the years is (no longer) the quiet hush-hush it used to be because it s a much livelier kind of place, but I think that [students] are also learning some of those social skills about how to behave in a library and the types of voice and action and learning conversations that are appropriate to a library environment. (Third Grade Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p 124)

The school library encourages collaborative work. School library also fosters collaborative learning in this environment of help. [Students are] learning how to work with each other and support each other, and how to ask questions and get the help that they need and how to share. (School Librarian) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 83)

Cooperative teamwork in the school library helps students how to learn to learn from each other. (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 121)

... Vygotsky would have been very happy. (School librarians) really understand that social learning is where deep learning happens. (Supervisor of Instruction) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 122)

'I like that the students get the opportunity of seeing two adults collaborating, working together, even during a project: One (teacher) bringing up an idea that the other might not have heard or thought of, with the students present.' (School Librarian) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, p. 88)

... [School librarians] don't get credit for ...[good] behavior and social skills... (Students) have to coexist and hopefully appreciate, not just tolerate each other, and respect the building and the equipment so that the rights that they have here are preserved going forward. All of that comes along with the experience that they have [in the school library] ... (English Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 122)

The school library supports learning in real world contexts

The (school) library is the place where the disciplines meet. 'In the classroom we sometimes become compartmentalized. Here, students can access info across disciplines, and I think that's a really important application of the knowledge that's happening in the classroom. They can come here and apply it in a real world setting.' (Social Studies Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, p. 97)

'I think the library is a gateway to the outside world. ... We could Skype or have a virtual experience with students across the country, in North Jersey, or in other parts of the world as we all read the same book, go through the same research experience. What they're doing in Senegal is different from what we are doing here. Wouldn't it be nice [to learn] that I'm different from you and you're different from me because we live in different countries – to look at how we learn and what we're learning and just have that sort of virtual experience in real time ... That would be a really nice component in the library as opposed to in a classroom.' (Language Arts Supervisor) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, p. 59)

SEL skills may be just as important as academic or cognitive skills for understanding how people succeed in school ...

... I think living in a world where we have so much information available ... it's almost dehumanizing... It's harder in a strange way to ask how to look [for information] ... {In the school library) there is someone you can ask who is not a teacher [who] grades you, not evaluating, just helping you learn how and where to look. You don't need this physical space for the information, but you need an environment with a person or persons to create that culture and develop that independent learning orientation and be set up for life in this kind of world. (History Teacher) (History Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, p.135)

The Information Search Process

Decades' of research suggests that something other than academic skills and content knowledge influences success in school and beyond. SEL skills may be just as important as academic or cognitive skills for understanding how people succeed in school, college, and careers. School libraries have the pedagogy to support social and emotional learning. It's called the Information Search Process, or Guided Inquiry, and it takes into account the emotions and behaviours, as well as thoughts, of information seekers and users.

The school library builds thinking and SEL skills

'Our librarian teaches search process which helps students focus their area of study without feeling intimidated. They seem to get it if they're caught in a section of the (information) search process. (Kuhlthau, 1984). Librarians have a series of tactics they use to break down frustration so the student doesn't waste time and can move on without being hindered and getting frustrated.' (Research Science Education and Science Teacher) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 77)

A good library allows them to see...culturally that there are choices, and it teaches kids to think carefully though all of this -- that books or materials are not slanted just one direction or another. They're coming from different perspectives. (Language Arts Supervisor) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, p. 98)

Teacher librarians have the expertise and teaching tools to incorporate social and emotional learning in the research process.

(School librarians) adapt ... to the individual learner. We have many students who come in with diverse needs and diverse ways of getting it --they're able to take it and they can break it down, and if [the school librarians] have to change their mode of presentation to help that student learn, they're willing to do it. (Principal) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p. 95)

'The learning that goes on here is not about how to do school. It's how to learn and the value of learning. So I think that because there is a culture ... Empowering students to control their own learning and to be responsible for it; ... How to figure out 'how to figure out;' ... It's not about learning how to do school it's about learning how to learn.' (Principal) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p.134)

So it was creating history knowledge. It was not just transporting information, but transforming information with new knowledge ... It cuts down on a lot of issues like plagiarism. There's no possible way to plagiarize those assignments because you have to think. And the kids like them because you have to think. It's not just a project they're given in written form. It has a visual component, it's something they can identify with that's in their interest, and it has a product, and they get to demonstrate their understanding in class on the white board. It's library orientation but in a different format leading to students knowing history. (School Librarian) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011, p.p. 97-98)

What does it look like when teacher librarians collaborate with their colleagues to teach social and emotion competencies?

Teacher librarians have the expertise and teaching tools to incorporate social and emotional learning in the research process. The article cited below provides an example of a personal development project that used authentic learning/assessment to develop SEL skills. This model, whether you take the whole enchilada or cherry-pick the learning tasks and formative assessment instruments, can be integrated with any lessons in the school library. This article demonstrates how, through collaboration with principals and teachers, best SEL practices can spread quickly through out the school.

Putting the Learner in Charge: Are Information Literacy Skills Enough?

Carol A. Gordon

Abstract. *A description of a non-tradition, extra-curricular research assignment for Grade 9 students that took place within the school day in an independent school raises questions about metacognition and learners' emotional dispositions that enable self-directed learning. The Personal Project, an authentic learning task with formative assessments is the vehicle for learning how young teens react to an assignment that targeted their ability to traverse the zone of proximal development to independently and successfully complete an assignment that addresses their personal interests.*

The study of this phenomenon was aimed at learning what worked from this case study, which piloted and evaluated the design and outcomes of the personal project. The fieldwork, or data collection process, was grounded in performance-based, authentic assessment practice and constructivist learning theory. Proposals, journals, peer reviews, self-evaluation rubrics, student-constructed project rubrics, and the guidance of adult advisors were continuously applied as: 1.) Learning tasks; 2) Assessments of product and process; 3.) and Data collection instruments. Observation, documented by field notes, was continuous.

An community exhibition and commentary from 'judges' who served as advisers to students during the project, provided written narratives, rather than grades. Narratives were guided by student-authored rubrics that were specific to each project. The narratives were summative assessments that were entered into students' permanent records. Findings revealed high levels of engagement, a 100 percent completion rate, and heightened student awareness of their own learning and self-regulation.

SEL Resources

The following resources provide practical applications for understanding, planning, implementing, and evaluating SEL instruction.

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Dr Carol A. Gordon is the Principal Consultant at Gordon & Associates Consulting. Dr Gordon was formerly Associate Professor, Library & Information Science at Rutgers – The State University of New Jersey, USA.