

*Social Emotional Learning and English Language Learners: A Review of the Literature*

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**ABSTRACT**

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a process of obtaining and effectually applying 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 in life for both children and adults. Early studies examining the impact of teaching SEL in the elementary classroom suggest that integrating SEL into the classroom curriculum and culture can support elementary students to better manage personal and collective behavior, to improve attendance rates, and to raise student achievement rates. This review of literature includes a focus on the existing literature and on the promising implications of incorporating SEL in mainstream classrooms which include English language learners (ELLs).

*Keywords: English language learners; social emotional learning; elementary mainstream classroom*

**INTRODUCTION**

All learning, including formal learning in school settings, is a complex, multifaceted amalgam of behaviors, cognition, social engagements, beliefs and perspectives, physical and emotional responses, and prior knowledge connections. Too often in schools and classrooms, the focus is

on cognitive development to the exclusion of other domains and aspects. But merely focusing on cognition is too simple, as Smagorinsky (2013) observes in a summary of his exhaustive reading and analysis of Lev Vygotsky's many publications:

From a Vygotskian perspective, emotions are inseparable from thinking. Indeed, Vygotsky assumed that all aspects of human life are interrelated, including what goes on within a person, even if it is all connected to what is outside the person and so cannot be so neatly isolated (pp.194-196).

Consequently, if Vygotsky is to be taken seriously, as Smagorinsky muses, what "goes on within a person" is an integral part of learning and cannot be "neatly isolated" from the more observable, outward actions and behaviors in the classroom, or in any part of life, for that matter (pp.194-196).

In this review of literature, we begin by first positing that all learners in K-12 classrooms benefit from an explicit, intentional, and curricular attention to social emotional learning. And while there is a growing recognition of this in the research, to this point very little specific research has been devoted to the impact of embedding social emotional learning into the curriculum for English language learners (ELLs).

A current approach known as social emotional learning (SEL) is widely being implemented in US K-12 schools. The organization, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) arose from an initial meeting comprised of educators, child advocates, and researchers in 1994. The goals for establishing social emotional learning are:

1. To increase the awareness of educators, trainers of school-based professionals, the scientific community, policymakers, and the public about the need for, and the

effects of, systematic efforts to promote the social and emotional learning (SEL) of children and adolescents;

2. To translate this scientific knowledge into effective school practices (Abbott, 2017); and
3. To facilitate the implementation, ongoing evaluation, and refinement of comprehensive social and emotional education programs, beginning in preschool and continuing through high school (Elias et al. p. 8).

According to CASEL (2017), SEL is the *process* through which children and adults obtain 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.

Another research group, Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg (2000) hoped to develop a coherent prevention and health program. This mixed group of youth advocates introduced SEL as “a conceptual framework to address both the needs of young people and the fragmentation that typically characterizes the response of schools to those needs” (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003, p. 467).

While SEL curriculum and teaching are proliferating rapidly in Central Indiana schools and across the US, scant attention has been paid thus far to the impact of SEL on English language learners (ELLs), who are non-native speakers of English. In this article we provide a foundation of SEL from the existing literature and build on this foundation to theorize promising implications of implementing SEL for ELLs in mainstream K-12 classrooms.

## Components of Social Emotional Learning

According to Zins and Elias (2007), SEL is the *process* through which children and adults obtain 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. There are five main components of social emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Elias, et al., 2017). Each component of SEL will next be defined and explained in detail.

*Self-awareness* refers to being aware of one's emotional triggers, feelings, and one's impact on others, and to having a growth mindset. This includes learning to stop, notice and articulate one's feelings, mood, or energy level in order to proactively preempt escalating into destructive or disruptive behaviors. Self-awareness can improve one's ability to manage oneself.

*Self-management* is the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations means the learner seeks patterns and identifies strategies which will increase the level of self-control one demonstrates in stressful or distracting situations. This includes creating and maintaining goals, whether personal or academic, and with time leads to being able to control impulsivity and being able to self-motivate (Elias, et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007).

*Social awareness* is recognizing that each of us comes from a variety of backgrounds and that being different from one another requires the ability to empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Social awareness also allows the learner to develop and demonstrate respect for others and to appreciate diverse perspectives.

*Relationship skills* represent the ability to establish and keep healthy relationships with individuals, whether from similar or diverse backgrounds. Key aspects of managing and maintaining these relationships are the ability to listen carefully and communicate clearly with others.

*Responsible decision-making* is the ability to make constructive choices in personal behavior and social interactions based on social norms, ethical standards and safety concerns. In a classroom setting, a student would be able to identify a problem, analyze the situations, and generate the best solution to the problem (Elias, et al., 2017; Zins & Elias, 2007).

### **Research on SEL**

Developing these SEL components results in students who are knowledgeable, responsible, and caring members of their classrooms and of their communities. Learning to manage oneself through SEL leads to improved academic success, to positive relationships within and beyond the classroom, and to students increasingly seeing themselves as assets in their community.

### **Research on SEL with ELLs**

ELLs are active learners of the English language who may benefit from several of types of language development programs (Abbott, 2017). Currently, more than 10% of all students in U.S. public schools are identified as ELLs and are predicted to be the fastest growing segment of the US K-12 population (NCELA, 2010). While very little research on the use of SEL with ELLs currently exists, Niehhaus and Adelson (2013) conducted a study of SEL with Spanish-speaking (87%), and Asian (6%) language background ELLs. Their 2014 study focused on ELLs' self-concept as an aspect of social emotional learning. Self-concept was defined as "an individual's perception of himself or herself based on interactions with the environment and personal interpretation of experiences" (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013, p. 228). Self-concept has significant

impact on academic performance, on physical, and on social emotional well-being. Niehaus and Adelson addressed all three aspects in their studies (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013; 2014).

Niehaus and Adelson (2013) were able to identify specific environmental stressors that can negatively impact ELLs such as: trauma and upheaval associated with immigration, family separations, poverty, discrimination, and cultural conflicts between the home and the school. Additional burdens include difficulty in learning English and experiencing bullying by peers. According to Niehaus and Adelson (2013), ELLs with limited English proficiency tend to have lower interpersonal skills and higher internalization of problems, higher externalizing problems, and fewer adaptive skills than English-speaking peers.

Niehaus and Adelson (2013) had three main findings regarding self-concept and SEL. First, they found that limited Spanish-speaking ELLs are at greater risk for both internalizing and externalizing problems compared to their English proficient peers in third grade. There were two factors that contributed to this higher risk. The first factor dealt with language acquisition. Spanish speaking ELLs acquired proficiency at a slower rate compared to their Asian ELL students. Niehaus and Adelson (2013) state that

If Spanish speaking ELLs are learning English more slowly, they may experience more difficulties with following directions, paying attention, and staying on task...Not knowing English may also present an additional source of anxiety and worry in the classroom (p. 236).

The second factor leading to higher risk for internalizing issues was the ELL socioeconomic status. In the study, 89% of Spanish speaking ELLs fell under the poverty line compared to 55% of Asian ELLs (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013). This concurs with Wilson, Hurtt, Shaw, Dishion, and Garnder's (2009) findings that when poverty and economic hardships are present, ELLs are

at greater risk for the development of psychological and behavioral concerns in the classroom when compared with English proficient (EP) students.

The second main finding Niehaus and Adelson (2013) found was that Asian language speaking ELLs rated themselves significantly lower on peer relationships compared to English proficient students. ELLs from an Asian background experienced difficulties making friends, felt not liked by peers, or had fewer friends compared with Spanish-speaking ELLs who tend to have higher and more positive peer interaction. The difference could be attributed to the fact that in U.S. schools the majority of ELLs are Spanish speakers and have greater opportunities to associate with people of shared cultural backgrounds. Finally, study findings suggest that ELLs from Asian language backgrounds are at a lower risk for externalizing problems compared to their EP counterparts in the classroom (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013).

One important implication that emerges from this study is the importance of teachers and school counselors being proactive with SEL approaches with ELLs, particularly Hispanic ELLs, in elementary school programs. Niehaus and Adelson (2013) conclude:

We typically see a large focus on improving the academic performance of ELL children in the classroom...but current findings suggest ELLs' social and emotional well-being may be equally important. Teachers, school counselors, and school administrators need to: (a) know that ELL children are vulnerable to mental health concerns (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013) and (b) have the knowledge and skills to work effectively with these children to alleviate such concerns, especially considering their negative contributions to academic development (p. 839).

Hence, if ELL academic performance improvement is desirable, investing time and resources in SEL in the early school years seems likely to positively impact current and future ELL achievement as well as the quality of their school experiences.

As a result of their 2013 findings, in a subsequent study, Niehaus and Adelson (2015) addressed three research questions:

1. Is a higher level of school support for ELLs and their families associated with more positive academic and social-emotional outcomes at the student level?
2. Is the relationship between school support and ELL students' academic and social-emotional outcomes mediated by parental school involvement?
3. How do ELL children's perceived academic and social emotional skills relate to their academic achievement? (p. 818)

To investigate these questions, Niehaus and Adelson (2014) performed a longitudinal study that examines ELLs from kindergarten through third grade. Students were from 420 different schools across the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West; and 1,450 ELL students participated in the study.

For the purpose of this paper, our focus is the results of the third research question, "How do ELL children's perceived academic and social emotional skills relate to their academic achievement?" (p. 818).

Niehaus and Adelson found that when ELL students' concerns in the classroom increased, their level of academic achievement decreased. Niehaus and Adelson identified externalized problems such as inattention, off-task behavior, and difficulties with classmates, while the internalized problems included worry, loneliness, sadness, and anxiety (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014).



There is a need for more research on the relationship between SEL and ELLs, yet we can gain insight from the research foundation Niehaus and Adelson provide (2013; 2014; 2015). The management of internalizing problems as well as managing peer relationships are two things that can be addressed by using SEL approaches. Thus, SEL holds promise as a best practice for all students, but has particular promise for ELLs in mainstream elementary classrooms.

### **Developing SEL in the Mainstream Classroom**

To achieve these goals in the elementary classroom, teachers must establish SEL environments that support, reinforce, and extend instruction. Instruction connects to the students' life outside of the classroom (Payton, et al., 2000). Payton et al (2000) have identified five steps for developing successful, high quality SEL practices in the classroom:

1. Selection of program objectives and a sequence of learning activities based on a clearly articulated conceptual framework;
2. Sufficient instruction and training for teachers to implement a variety of learning strategies that actively involve students, draw on their previous experience, provide them with opportunities for skill practice and feedback, and address their diverse learning style;
3. Structures to assist teachers infuse and apply SEL instruction across other subject areas within the school curriculum;
4. Well organized, easy to follow lesson plans with clear objectives and learning activities, student assessment tools, and a rational linking individuals' lessons to the overall program designed; and
5. Tools for monitoring program implementation with guidance on how to use the tools and the data collected to improve the program delivery (p. 183).

These five steps are essential for an effective SEL program. After the successful implementation of the five steps into the daily life and culture of the school, the next step is to extend SEL knowledge beyond the classroom and into the community (Payton, et al., 2000).

Zins and Elias (2007) identify positive outcomes from SEL that lead to success in school and life. Observed and quantified positive outcomes include more prosocial behavior; fewer absences and suspensions; maintained or improved attendance reductions in aggression, disruptions, and interpersonal violence; fewer hostile negotiations, lower rate of conduct problems; and better conflict resolution. In terms of attitude, the positive outcomes identified include: improved sense of self-efficacy; a better sense of community and view of school as caring; stronger commitments to democratic values; improved coping with school stressors; and greater trust and respect for teachers

And in terms of academic performance, students who participated in SEL demonstrated improved math, language arts, and social studies skills; increased achievement over time (elementary to middle school); improved “learning to learn” or metacognition skills; better problem solving and planning; and improved nonverbal reasoning (p. 236). Moreover, students who participated in long term SEL shifted from being mainly controlled by external factors to increasing internalized beliefs and values, showed greater caring and concern for others, more frequently made good decisions, and demonstrated greater ownership for their choices and behaviors (Bear & Watkins, 2006).

### **Implications for Implementing SEL in the Mainstream Classroom**

Implementation of SEL in the elementary classroom is a marathon, not a sprint. Building classroom community, goal setting, and problem solving are three ways to build SEL into the classroom.

## **Build Community**

A suggested first step for implementing SEL is developing a classroom community. In order for the students to grow individually and as a group, trust and safety must first be established in the classroom. As Zins and Elias (2007) observe, “The classroom becomes a microcosm of the larger community, giving students an opportunity to try out and develop the social skills that elicit caring and support (p. 45)”. One way to achieve this classroom community is to hold classroom meetings. Classroom meetings are also known variously as morning meetings, councils, connections or sharing circles. Regardless of the term used, classroom meetings offer a structure and consistent opportunity for students to speak without interruption. Classroom meetings give a choice to the student by allowing students to pass or speak. There are different activities that take place in a classroom meeting. Each activity is created to have one speaker at a time. Having one student speak at a time is beneficial for many reasons. For all students, it also reduces the impulsivity of shouting out and requires them to listen. A benefit for ELL students is that they get to hear native English speakers. In this sharing time, students are listening to their peers, creating connections, and building a classroom community (Zins & Elias, 2007).

Upon the establishment of classroom community, a next step would be to teach mindfulness. Mindfulness is described as the state of being conscious or aware of something. It is being aware of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environments (Silver, 2017). Mindfulness can start when the students enter into the classroom with a simple one minute mediation (Silver, 2017). The teacher should participate with the students and invite the students to close their eyes. Building up stamina for this activity would be necessary for different grade levels.

The purpose of beginning with meditation is to release the stress and anxieties of the day. This should be a consistent practice inside of the classroom. Depending on the grade level of students or the English level of ELLs, the teacher models the desired behavior, gradually increases the amount of meditation time, and makes regular, daily time for meditation practice. As Niehaus and Adelson (2013; 2014; 2015) have demonstrated, ELLs regularly experience worry and anxiety. Starting the class period or day with a quick mediation has the potential to alleviate or reduce the impact of stressors.

### **Goal Setting**

Elias (2003) describes the importance and impact of goal setting:

Children are required to learn many things, but without a sense of connection between and to those things, children are not likely to retain what they learn and use it in their lives. When their learning is presented in terms of understandable goals (goals that children can play a larger role in defining as they get older), children become more engaged and focused and less likely to exhibit behavior problems (p. 15).

A practical implementation of goal setting in the classroom is to have students set and manage their goals. Goals can be created for improving academic performance in a specific subject. Goals could also be centered on individual students increasing the quantity and quality of classroom contributions. Individual or whole group behavioral goals can also be identified. At regular intervals throughout the day, the teacher could stop and ask students to explain or demonstrate specific ways to calm down when are upset. The class and teacher could brainstorm and practice possible strategies to use when frustrated or in a difficult situation. Once generated, this list of strategies and approaches are available for the teacher to remind the students of *before*

the behavior outburst occurs (Elias, 2003). Goals should be measurable for the students to track their growth. For example, a student could set a behavioral goal to reduce behavior outbursts from five times a day to one time a day.

### **Problem solving**

Problem solving for students is another beneficial SEL approach because it allows for them to apply the skill to both familiar and unfamiliar situations. In the classroom, the teacher could teach problem solving strategies for understanding fiction, history, or current events-topics which readily relate to the lives of young students. Teachers select topics of interest to students which connect to home culture. To develop stronger problem-solving skills while studying an historical or current event, Elias (2003) provides guiding questions:

- What is the event that you are thinking about? When and where did it happen? Put the event into words as a problem or choice or decision.
- What people or groups were involved in the problem? What were their different feelings? What were their points of view about the problem?
- What did each of these people or groups want to have happen? Try to put their goals into words.
- For each person or group, name some different options or solutions to the problem that they thought might help them reach their goals.
- For each option or solution, picture all the things that might have happened next. Envision both long-and short-term consequences.
- What were the final decisions? How were they made? By whom? Why? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- How was the solution carried out? What was the plan? What obstacles or roadblocks were met? How well was the problem solved? Why?
- Rethink it. What would you have chosen to do? Why? (p. 14)

Thinking, talking, and wrestling with these questions can be done individually, in pairs or small groups, or as a whole group. The topic for discussion could be selected by the teacher or by a student. This activity allows for students to discover and build their problem-solving skills (Elias, 2003). Open-ended questioning is a staple of SEL and provides concrete supports for the students in their learning, particularly when paired with timely, specific, and constructive feedback.

Teachers can acknowledge and support student learning preferences by offering a variety of approaches and modalities, such as role playing, dance or drama, working with manipulatives, art, computer technology, or digital media. Creating centers or critical literacy invitations (Van Sluys, 2005) within the classroom is a great way to support ELLs comprehension and to increase the level and quality of their engagement in SEL. As an introduction to SEL, for example, centers featuring SEL components or skills could be created in which students can explore what each component means and begin to notice when others are demonstrating SEL skills, and then analyze for themselves the impact of SEL through reading, writing, listening and speaking, thus integrating SEL into interdisciplinary learning. This approach also allows students to review and revisit each SEL skill in multiple settings and under varying conditions, thus creating increasingly comprehensible exposure to SEL for ELLs over time.

### **Conclusion**

While there is still a great need for additional research on implementing SEL in the mainstream classroom with ELLs, early studies (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013; 2014; 2015) show great promise,

particularly when SEL is implemented throughout the curriculum and becomes the foundation of an inclusive and supportive classroom culture. The more SEL is integrated into the natural, normal ways of being together in the classroom, the more students' social and emotional skills will improve. When SEL is given ample time to develop and is robustly integrated into the curriculum, over time ELLs are likely to show meaningful improvements in classroom behavior, attendance, and overall achievement. Social emotional learning in the elementary mainstream classroom might well be the missing key for ELLs to achieve long-term success inside of and beyond the classroom.

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