

Social-Emotional Learning for Post-Secondary Success

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Abstract: Integrating social-emotional learning into High School English Language Arts supports growth in the emotional intelligence of students which is needed for post-secondary success. Social-emotional learning develops student competence in self and social awareness, reasonable decision making, establishing relationships, and self-management. These competencies improve students' academic achievement and attitude about school. This can be critical to their transition and adjustment to postsecondary life as they enter college and the workplace. As students become employees, there is an expectation that they will be able to conduct themselves professionally and perform well in their jobs or careers. Postsecondary success is a main goal of schooling, so learning how to integrate social-emotional learning into high school English language arts is worthwhile.

Introduction

Jenna, a high school student, is quietly working on a class assignment in English language arts. Her class has been asked to help decide their next book to read by talking in small groups. Jenna ignores the directions deciding to work alone, writing down her thoughts. After a while, Jenna's teacher asks everyone to share their ideas. Jenna has written many books she'd like to read with strong points to support her choices, but she doesn't like speaking in front of her class. So, when asked to share she claims she couldn't think of anything. Her teacher responds "Are you sure? There are no wrong answers, and everyone's feedback is helpful! I'd love to know what you wrote down." Jenna confirms her answer by shaking her head no and her teacher respectfully moves on to the next student. After everyone shares their suggestions, the class takes a vote and selects their book.

Later, Jenna expresses disappointment with the group's selection to a classmate saying, "It's so boring! I can't believe you voted to read this." Her classmate responds with an eye roll and reminds J that she had a chance to suggest something else but declined. Annoyed, Jenna says, "Whatever. You only picked this book because you know they like it," gesturing to her classmate's crush. Embarrassed, her classmate gets quiet just in time for class to start.

High school students like Jenna are in a unique developmental period of life known as adolescence. They face the pivotal point where their learning and performance in school start to blend with the needed skills and expectations of adult life. The lessons learned or not learned from the classroom lead and shape postsecondary life. In Jenna's case, learning to follow directions, work in a team, communicate with her teacher and peers, build self-confidence, adjust her attitude, and be accountable demonstrate a few lessons that will affect her later in life. These same areas all contribute to the academic and personal success of all students. While the lessons Jenna is exposed to during the classroom activity are seemingly broad, there is a common

thread among them that deserves attention from educators teaching high school English language arts (ELA). Jenna's social and emotional competencies determined how she perceived and responded to the class activity and remarks from her peer. A key component to her success or failure is the development of emotional intelligence acquired through social-emotional learning weaved into the lessons in her ELA class. ELA is foundational to our ability to communicate making it the ideal content area to facilitate social-emotional learning.

Definitions

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process of understanding and exemplifying self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building skills, and responsible decision-making skills (Schlund, 2011). It is the framework used to develop our ability to recognize and manage our emotions and behaviors in various situations. Students engaged in SEL methods and techniques acquire a broad range of life skills such as resilience, empathy, and adaptability and are less susceptible to negative life outcomes (Merrell et al., 2008). Schools that promote systemic SEL often report higher academic success that is attributed to students' ability to handle challenges constructively and foster positive relationships with their teacher and peers (Dresser, 2013).

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to identify and manage the emotions of yourself and others and is acquired through the process of SEL. It combines our cognitive and emotional skills and abilities to produce socially acceptable behaviors. Emotional intelligence is needed for adolescents to navigate multiple life aspects such as popularity and acceptance in a way that positively contributes to their development of self-worth and promotes self-advocacy. As students become adults, their development of EI will affect how they learn from experience, their perception and insight, and their ambition and motivation (Basu & Mermillod, 2011).

The growing interest in SEL in the classroom and EI in the workplace further proves the importance of adequately preparing high school students for their post-secondary world. Both student and employee need to have developed (or be developing) skills in interpersonal relationships, leadership, and self-management. To be successful in life they must be capable of compassion, dedication, influence, goal setting and achievement, stress management, and be socially aware (Basu & Mermillod, 2011). Skills such as these are of strong interest to both business and college environments.

Why We Should Integrate SEL into High School ELA

While all content areas should integrate SEL, high school ELA educators are in a unique position because of the age group of their students and the interdependent relationship between ELA and SEL. According to Storey (2019), "ELA provides ample opportunity for meaningful personal engagement and connection, meaning making, and reflection. The pith and substance of ELA involves matters that are intricately interwoven with social and affective experiences" (p. 126). By design, ELA is a content area that prompts the exploration of social and emotional topics like

relationships, conflict, point of view, and identity (Storey, 2019). When we engage with literature, we can view the world from different perspectives, empathize with stories both familiar and unfamiliar, and learn to express our own stories. Recall the various literary works you were assigned in high school ELA such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. A tale of young love, family drama, death, suicide, choice, and consequence, renders an abundance of relatable themes for any student to explore. Students can either see themselves within the story, debate on what they would or wouldn't do, and even analyze complicated emotions like love and grief. Literature provides a safe space to vicariously examine the nuances of life.

Methods and assessments used in high school ELA also align with SEL engagement strategies. In Jenna's class, she and her classmates were tasked with selecting the next book. By directing the students to talk to each other in small groups, suggest and defend their ideas, and present to the entire class, the teacher effortlessly combined ELA and SEL. Including the class in decisions that affect them supports empowerment. Asking for the reasoning behind their book suggestions strengthens critical thinking and communication. Since the class needed to pick one book handling approval, rejection, disappointment, or satisfaction are just a few examples of the emotions that the assignment would create. Literacy is foundational to developing social-emotional skills. When students are asked to read or write to persuade, innovate, and reflect, it strengthens their skills in effective communication and critical thinking. Engaging students in assignments based on literature and communication allow students the opportunity to reflect on who they are and how they want to live their lives which helps to shape their identities (Marlatt, 2020).

Vocabulary is one way to explain, express, or convey our emotions. While studying high school ELA, students can broaden the words they use to accurately describe their emotions which is key in identification and management. Students or adults that are unable to clearly express their emotions risk being misunderstood, experiencing compounding or secondary emotions, and misdirecting their behavior connected to their emotions (Vila et al., 2021). Think about Jenna's interactions with her peers. When challenged for complaining about the class decision, she became defensive and responded by embarrassing and insulting her classmate. Having the right words to communicate internally and externally what she was feeling could have avoided her poor behavior.

SEL Teaching Strategies and Implementation

Recall Jenna's interaction with her high school ELA teacher. Her teacher knew Jenna had something to contribute and offered positive encouragement to convince her to share her thoughts. Additionally, her teacher assigned the class to select a book by discussing suggestions, providing input, and making a final selection by voting. These are examples of implementing SEL in the ELA classroom. Jenna and her classmates were provided the opportunity to reflect, speak, listen, and ultimately work together to decide. Teaching strategies and classroom activities that promote SEL could be easily included, but according to Marlatt (2020), they lack strategies to support effective classroom implementation. ELA curricula and standards provide a natural framework for integrating ELA. This can be done in a variety of ways, but teachers need to use strategies within classroom assignments and activities that con-

nect to a SEL competency to target and support the development of specific social-emotional skills and knowledge. One sample strategy addressing self-awareness would have students complete a project describing their personal goals and interests and answering provided questions to have them elaborate in order to help students understand how to set goals, identify personal characteristics, and explain their ways of thinking. Another strategy to address responsible decision making would have students identify a decision made by a figure from the literature. They would be asked to think about the process and outcome of the figure's choice and share their opinions. Using literature can allow students to explore more complicated themes. Other areas that can be addressed through strategy use in the ELA classroom include self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills.

SEL and Post-Secondary Success

Our world is ever-evolving and requires us to keep up the pace. SEL provides us with the ability to deal with the changes in the world respectfully and productively. According to Paolini (2020):

Social emotional learning is vital for career success, as it emphasizes the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that people need in order to be productive and efficient in their work setting including leadership, celebrating diversity, effective communication skills, accountability, assertiveness, conflict resolution, time and stress management, as well as motivation (p. 125).

In addition to the future success of students, SEL enhances their experience in school and encourages educators to bring relevance and meaning to the content. By scaffolding SEL standards into ELA content, students can succeed academically while building skills and knowledge applicable to their personal and professional development.

Shortly after graduating high school, Jenna lands her first job. She initially struggles with attendance, following the dress code, inappropriate phone use during work hours, and understanding her job duties but improves by asking for help and being receptive to feedback. Overall, she enjoys her work and feels important because so many people depend on her.

After a few months, she starts having trouble with a co-worker. When Jenna first started, she considered her co-worker a friend. They followed each other on social media, exchanged text messages, and spent time together outside of work. Recently, they can't work together without arguing over simple tasks, and Jenna believes her co-worker is starting rumors about her. Fed up, Jenna decides to confront her co-worker during their shift. The two engage in a heated argument exchanging insults and expletives in front of other employees and clients. Management intervenes to calm Jenna and her friend, but Jenna refuses to finish her shift with her co-worker. Upset, she decides to leave her shift without informing her team.

When comparing Jenna's behavior at school and at work, we can identify a few changes and stagnations. Relationships with her peers remain a challenge as she acts based on emotion. Keeping her job for some months is an indication she has grown

in responsibility but arriving late, refusing to work, and leaving early show there is still room for improvement. Communication remains an issue though she was able to ask for help and was receptive to feedback. In a professional environment, Jenna's behavior will have major consequences. Behavior at work affects a person's ability to thrive professionally and maintain employment. On a personal level, Jenna could be losing a source of confidence and a friendship. Professionally, she may lose her job and destroy a potential connection that could serve her in her future. However, if she had acquired the necessary social emotional competencies as a high school student, she could have improved her experience as an employee.

Conclusion

The time of transition between ending high school and beginning our post-secondary path is challenging and peculiar. It is the time of life when we test boundaries, develop independence, and build self-esteem. Our perception of the world shifts as we are faced with the daunting realities of impending adulthood. As we close our coming-of-age era and emerge into the post-secondary world as adults, we are expected to show up with hard skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic and soft skills like communication, relationship building, and conflict management. Our skills are developed both in and out of the classroom, but there are learning opportunities at school with the potential to shape our future success or failure being overlooked and underrated. As educators, we have a responsibility to prepare our students for the world outside of our classrooms. High school ELA is the ideal space to create skill-building opportunities for developing emotional intelligence. Ambitious as it may be, integrating SEL into ELA proves to be an effective way to help our adolescent students effectively prepare for adulthood.

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About the Author

Gena Collier is currently studying curriculum and instruction at the University of Toledo. Her career in training and professional development shapes her perspective on education. She recognizes the parallels and gaps between school and work and focuses her research on this area.