Social and Emotional Learning

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Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has been a popular term among educators. Everyone is keen on incorporating it into their classrooms and teaching skills. But, what exactly is SEL?

Social and Emotional Learning is the process in which we develop the following skills:

- understanding our own feelings and how they influence our behavior (self-awareness)
- managing our feelings to achieve a goal (self-management)
- empathizing with others and their behaviors (social awareness)
- maintaining healthy relationships with others (relationship skills)
- regulating our own behavior when we interact with others (responsible decision-making)

As teachers,we can we help our students develop all these abilities through SEL right from the start of a new school year.

Self-awareness

When we greet our students at the beginning of our class, we commonly ask, *How are you?* and most of the times, the answer is, *Fine thank you, and you?*

But saying fine, doesn't really explain what they are feeling.

To help our students understand their own feelings, the first thing we have to do is to make sure they know words they can use to express feelings and their meanings.

Students might not completely understand what is going on, but they can certainly feel it!

So, what can you do?

- Teach adjectives that describe feelings and emotions such as *happy*, *excited*, *sad*, *frustrated*, *embarrassed*, *angry*, etc. You can use your students' first language to introduce these words, flashcards with images, etc.
- Give students a set of vocabulary cards. Have them choose one to express how they are feeling.
- Display key vocabulary on the bulletin board that provides students with all the words for naming feelings, so they can truly express how they feel when you ask them, *How are you?*
- Ask specific questions. If *How are you?* leaves too many options, ask instead, *Are you frustrated? Are you happy?*
- Have students express their feelings as a part of their daily routines or during circle time.

These activities help create a welcoming learning environment where everyone feels cared for and supported. Sometimes school is the only safe place students have to express their feelings and ask for help if they need to.

Social awareness

When we let our students talk about their feelings and share their stories, we can understand why they behave the way they do. It is not easy to share how we feel, so it is important to demonstrate our empathy, understanding, and our gratitude for having the courage to share with others.

So, what can you do?

- When students finish talking, thank them for sharing.
- Demonstrate empathy by saying things like, *I hear you, I would feel that way as well, I'm sorry you had to deal with this,* etc.
- Recognize their strength and value.
- Tell them they are not alone and offer help.
- If possible, encourage other students to give them positive feedback, too, to demonstrate empathy and compassion for their classmates.

If well managed, this activity can help create a strong community of mutual support and a more tolerant environment. When students learn that they can go through similar situations and can feel the same way as their classmates do, you will be creating an inclusive classroom environment where students help each other to grow.

Self-management

When students are feeling strong or profound emotions, and don't know what to do or how to manage them, they show problematic behavior in class. It is easier to help them when we understand why they are behaving the way they do.

When we are feeling extreme emotions, such as *anger, insecurity, loneliness*, etc., our mind is focused on processing them, which makes us feel stressed. When this happens, our brain produces a "stress hormone" called *cortisol*, that puts us on an attack or escape mode.

Some students may show they are stressed by being mean to others because they are trying to process stress. Some others may get distracted easily, daydream, or simply raise their hand frequently saying they want to go to the restroom because they are trying to escape.

When we are stressed, we cannot learn.

In all of these cases, students feel frustrated because they can't concentrate and lose motivation to learn. They also feel they are perceived as "bad students" because they are "misbehaving".

If we want them to learn to manage their feelings and be successful in our class, we have to show them we care.

So, what can you do?

- If you notice someone is experiencing strong emotions or is hurting others, give them a "time out" for them to breathe and calm down. Speak privately to them, so they can tell you what is going on and how you can help. If they refuse help, let them process the emotion alone, but make sure they understand they can always ask you for assistance.

- If there are students that are not attentive, ask them why. Let them express their feelings about that particular task or lesson setup. If you want to foster SEL and create an inclusive classroom, students need to know that they are entitled to their feelings about tasks and lessons. Listen to their feedback and use it to create a more engaging lesson. Remember not all groups are alike.

If you notice a student is having problematic behavior for more than two days, ask the school's counselor for help or reach out to their parents in order to find a solution together.

When students feel seen and appreciated, their self-esteem improves. A student that feels important and recognized by his teacher is a student motivated to learn.

Relationship skills

As students work together in class, they sometimes feel scared of being ridiculed for making mistakes, lonely if they feel they have no one to work with, angry when things are not done the way they want, etc. This can create problems within the classroom that can make students feel stressed and unmotivated to learn. As teachers we have to detect how our students are interacting with each other, so we can also plan activities that can help them learn to communicate effectively, cooperate, solve problems in a constructive way, and tolerate their frustration of not doing things the way they want.

So, what can you do?

- Plan activities in which students learn to listen attentively to others and restate what the others said, so there are no misunderstandings. This includes making eye-contact when the other person is speaking. This shows respect.

- Plan activities in which students have to take turns, so they learn to share and be patient.

- Promote activities in which students have to work in small teams of no more than four members. It's important to give each member of the team a specific task to do from the beginning, so they all work together to achieve a goal. Tell them they have to achieve the goal in a specific time. Encourage them to brainstorm ideas and vote on the best one. If they are having problems with reaching an agreement, have them look for help. Ask them to learn to listen to other's points of view and communicate their ideas respectfully, so they can come up with a solution to the problem together.

- Set up an appreciation box in your classroom where they can write something positive about their classmates after they have worked together in a team or had a postitive interaction. At the end of the week, read the notes to build a sense of community and togetherness. Make sure there is a note for every student in the class. This will help create healthy relationships within the class and develop a safe environment to learn, where students will feel motivated and loved.

- Remind students that mistakes are a part of the learning process, and we can learn from them. Model this behavior by providing multiple chances for students to attempt a task and get feedback without being graded or judged.

Conclusion

In the future, students might forget the content of your curriculum, but they will never forget that extra step you took to help them. This learning will stay in their hearts and minds forever.

Remember, the person comes first. The rest can wait!