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SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Promoting and Developing Social and Emotional Skills in the Secondary Classroom

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, the statistically predictable difference in academic achievement between American children of differing socioeconomic status and race (the achievement gap) has been largely explained by the cognitive hypothesis. This hypothesis links early cognitive experiences, such as the number of words heard by children before the age of three, to their later academic success. While the cognitive hypothesis sheds valuable light on the importance of early intellectual stimuli, more recent evidence indicates that behavior and social skills – as promoted through social and emotional learning – have remarkable value, and correlate with academic achievement,[1] well-being,[2] and lifelong professional success.[3] The work of economist James Heckman, in particular, points to the crucial role of early childhood education in developing the social and emotional skills, including perseverance and self-control, which are essential for later academic success. Heckman's research discloses that the achievement gap is established by age three, and while unequal exposure to spoken words certainly is a part of the gap, unequal opportunities to develop social and emotional skills in early childhood educational settings contribute as well. Education journalist Paul Tough adds the insight that social and emotional skills, while of equal influence with cognitive skills in predicting academic success, are more malleable later in childhood and adolescence.[4] Social and emotional learning, therefore, provides a much-needed practical venue for closing the achievement gap.

DESCRIPTIVE EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

I teach in a school, Open World Learning Community (OWL), that has identified five noncognitive skills, or "habits of work and learning," to promote. These skills are integrity, perseverance, responsibility, collaboration, and stewardship. We exercise the skills in an advisory class called Crew, after Kurt Hahn's saying, "Nobody is allowed to be a passenger; everyone belongs to the ship's crew." Crew is a safe, low-stakes environment in which kids can learn and practice these skills. Crew is a multi-age class including students in grades 6-12, where students may remain with the same Crew leader for up to seven years. Crew meets for thirty minutes every school day. Conferences and parent communication are channeled through Crew leaders, who serve as touchstones for parents and advocates for students. This long-term, consistent relationship can lead to the type of secure attachments that facilitate social and emotional learning.

School-wide teaching practices and behavior policies serve to promote and reinforce the skills first practiced in Crew. Below, I describe Crew lessons and teaching practices that promote three of the skills best correlated with academic and lifelong achievement: perseverance (also referred to by researchers as persistence, resilience, growth mindset[5] or grit[6]), responsibility (also referred to as conscientiousness, self-control, self-regulation, or diligence) and collaboration (cooperation, teamwork).

Perseverance

Perseverance, like other skills, can be strengthened by practice. In OWL's Crew classrooms, a series of perseverance lessons springs to life every fall. These lessons break down perseverance into five sub-skills, including working through difficult tasks and accepting feedback to revise work. The lessons place each sub-skill in a comfortable, engaging and fun context, set by a lesson format[7] that includes a greeting, a "share" question that invites students to know one another, and an inspirational reading.

In one lesson, students practice working through difficult tasks blindfolded. As a class, students pick up a single large rope. They work to form geometric shapes with the rope, beginning with a triangle and gradually working up to square and hexagon. In another lesson, students are challenged with a difficult logic puzzle: with six students on seven 1-foot-square placeholders, students must reorder themselves in reverse without stepping off of the placeholders.

In a third lesson, students play a collaborative game that inevitably involves peer feedback and revision. One student stands at the far end of a field or gym, facing away from the larger group with a toy on the ground behind her. She recites a poem while facing away from the group, and then spins around. She repeats the poem and spins around after each repeat. The group's goal is to bring the toy behind their starting line, racing up behind the poet and freezing when she turns around. If the poet sees a group member move or take the toy, she may send that member back to the starting line. The first several rounds of the game elicit groans of frustration as the group is caught by the poet. Eventually, the group huddles up, revises their tactics, and wins the game.

All students at OWL discuss and practice perseverance in Crew at the beginning of each school year. As their classes progress, perseverance is promoted, rewarded, and reinforced in academic classes, where teachers require students to rethink answers to small assignments and completely revise larger assignments, including papers and tests. Feedback for revision comes from peers as well as teachers. After students have practiced accepting feedback during a low-stakes game, they are more likely to succeed accepting academic feedback to use that feedback in meaningful revisions. These meaningful revisions produce high-quality schoolwork, and at OWL, have drastically improved credit acquisition. Long-term commitment to goals, or perseverance, "means living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint."[8] Kids who develop perseverance in the classroom are more likely to apply it in college settings, jobs, and even relationships. As adults, they are more likely to reach their goals. All successful professionals know that perseverant craftsmanship yields professional and personal satisfaction.

Responsibility

To practice reflecting on how one's own actions affect others, students in Crew pair off. One partner is the "driver" and the other is the "car." The car is blindfolded and the driver is silent—both parties must reflect on the impact of their actions if they are to successfully navigate the game. In an "Identity Crisis" game, the teacher tapes the names of celebrities to each student's back. To practice asking questions and

getting help, students ask one another for hints that help identify their celebrities. A wide variety of number and letter games allow students to practice doing a simple job without being told or reminded. To practice coming to class prepared, students plan a party that requires each Crew member to bring an item; the party is the most successful when all students come prepared with contributions.

Each of these Crew lessons begins with a statement of the skill and sub-skill emphasized. When that skill is called upon in an academic setting, teachers use the same language. For example, a teacher might say to a student, "Where is your pencil? It is time to get to work." If the student has forgotten a pencil, the teacher provides one, and also says, "Remember that at OWL, you need to come to class on time, organized and prepared to learn every day. Tomorrow I'd like you to bring your own pencil, all right?"

Academic teachers also further the development of student responsibility by integrating student choice into daily learning. A gradual release model allows age-appropriate development of responsibility skills. For example, a seventh grade student might construct a cell model in which all of the materials are provided, and he may choose which material represents which cell component. A tenth grade student might be given an assignment in which he is given a list of cell components to include, but must go out into the world to select model-making materials. A twelfth grade student would be given a textbook or website describing cell parts, and then asked to teach his peers about cell components' structures and functions in whatever way he thinks would be best.

The ultimate goal of these scaffolding exercises is to develop students' self-direction. By the last year or two of high school, OWL students are going out into the world, conducting internships and service projects. Some take college classes on local campuses. Seniors must complete graduation portfolios with written reflections for six academic areas, teacher recommendations for three academic areas, and documentation of 300 service hours. With this work completed, college application becomes infinitely more accessible, and 100% of OWL graduates have been accepted into colleges for the past three years. When a student has a sense of responsibility and self-control, she is empowered to direct her own learning and life experiences. OWL strives to produce graduates who do more than what the world asks of them; OWL strives to produce graduates who discern what the world needs and act as citizen-leaders to fill that need.

Collaboration

Collaborative work is highly valued in the workplace, and yet many students express extreme frustration when faced with group projects in school. The promotion and development of collaborative skills mitigates frustration and prepares students to be effective colleagues in the world beyond school.

A particularly challenging collaboration sub-skill OWL students face is accepting personal differences so that they can work with any of their peers. One Crew lesson that builds this sub-skill engages students in a cooperative storytelling project. Going around a circle, each student contributes to an ongoing storyline, speaking until a designated student leader says, "Cut!" At this point, the next student in the circle continues the story. Students must incorporate the story line established by their predecessors, accepting whatever zany details they've inherited. In academic classes, student in almost every OWL class sit at four-person tables; teacher development of seating charts is a delicate balancing act requiring knowledge of which students are ready to increase their sphere of acceptance and to truly work with any peer.

A series of Crew teambuilding games helps students take on assigned group roles, solicit the opinions of group members, and work toward group goals. In academic classes, teachers often assign roles to students working in groups. Students who have fulfilled roles in collaborative groups playing card games, untying impossibly knotted ropes, and crossing imaginary shark-infested oceans have experiences that transfer to roles in collaborative groups conducting science experiments and constructing historical timelines.

Collaboration skills are essential in increasingly team-based collegiate and work environments. Individuals who are able to look past personal differences, solicit the contributions of peers, and synthesize cooperative projects are the leaders of our college campuses, offices, and government. OWL's integration of collaborative work in Crew and in academic classrooms is a driver of these skills. During their time at OWL, students' collaborative skills contribute significantly to the school culture, which is highly accepting with little bullying in middle school, and no bullying in the high school grades.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

James Comer said, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." The foundation of a positive, trusting student-teacher relationship is essential in social and emotional learning. For a student to exercise and develop in the affective sphere, she must feel safe and supported. The structure of Crew provides an ideal setting for building relationships between teachers and students, this work can and does occur in traditional school settings.

For example, teachers in traditional school settings interested in supporting students' perseverance often use formative assessments and ongoing feedback procedures to encourage students to revise their work. The revision process—whether applied to a formal literary analysis paper or a musical performance—strengthens students' perseverance by rewarding efforts that build toward a carefully crafted product. In the revision process, students learn that practice leads to growth, and the classroom community benefits from a deeper commitment to learning.

Teachers can establish and deepen positive student-teacher relationships by addressing students by name, greeting students individually, answering student questions, honoring students' home cultures with respectful curiosity, and providing help when students ask for it. It takes time to build trust, and more time to evoke the social and emotional skills that are so valuable and essential to students' success. But it can be done within a traditional school year, and the rewards—high-quality work, improved credit acquisition, improved college acceptance, and a cooperative classroom culture—are worthwhile for students and teachers.

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[2] Richard Roberts, Educational Testing Service. "Importance of Noncognitive Skills." Presentation at National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) Conference (July 16, 2013).
[3] Erik Lindqvist and Roine Vestman. "The Labor Market Returns to Cognitive and Noncognitive Ability: Evidence from the Swedish Enlistment," American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 3, no. 1 (January 2011).
[4] Paul Tough. How Children Succeed (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).
[5] Carol S. Dweck. Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).
[6] Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(6), 1087-1101
[7] This lesson format emerged from work in Responsive Classroom and Developmental Designs, a research-based approach to social and emotional learning from the Origins Program.
[8] Angela Lee Duckworth. "The Key to Success? Grit." TED talk, available: http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit.html (April 2013)