



Supporting English Learners with Social and Emotional Learning

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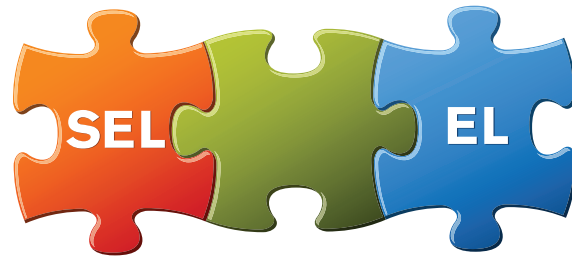
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Supporting English Learners with Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning can be a critical factor in helping close achievement gaps among English learners.

Here's why—along with strategies for success.

When a seventh-grade student named Javier (real name withheld for privacy) arrived in North Kansas City, Missouri a few years ago, his English skills were somewhat limited. But that was just one of the many challenges he faced in his education.



Javier, whose first language was Spanish, was a U.S.-born English learner (EL), and his education had been interrupted as a result of transiency and homelessness. He had plateaued at the intermediate level of language proficiency and was lacking the academic English skills necessary to do well in core content courses.

Javier's family had been on the move for years as his single mother looked for work to support her six children. Because they moved frequently, Javier and his siblings had not been to school for the six months before enrolling in the new school. Javier and his family were living in an apartment when he first enrolled, but they were soon evicted and moved into a series of homeless shelters. Because some of these shelters were outside the school district's boundaries, Javier often had to take a cab to school.

Not only was Javier trying to learn English and master the seventh-grade curriculum simultaneously; he was also adjusting to yet another community while helping to take care of his siblings and dealing with crushing poverty.

But because the city's school district has integrated social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies and trauma-sensitive teaching practices into its EL classrooms, Javier is now thriving in his new environment.

"Even with all of that chaos in his life, with strong structures, routines, and high expectations from the EL teacher, he grew to be on grade level in math by the spring semester and exited the ELL program that same year," says Laura Lukens, ELL (English language learner) coordinator for North Kansas City Schools. "By the following year, he was on grade level for English as well."

ELs face tremendous challenges in achieving high standards, and educators face a number of hurdles in teaching them. Aside from overcoming the obvious language barrier, ELs often must adjust to a new culture, and many have experienced trauma or adverse circumstances they must rise above as well.

Of course, not all ELs have endured the kind of hardships that Javier had to overcome. But focusing on social and emotional needs can play an important role in helping all ELs succeed, regardless of their particular circumstances.

According to CASEL ([Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018](#)), SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply five core competencies: learning how to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy, build and maintain positive relationships, and make better, more responsible decisions.

Although K-12 schools have a long way to go in supporting the diverse needs of EL students, instructional approaches that use research-based SEL practices and culturally responsive teaching strategies hold tremendous promise in helping these students achieve high standards.

“SEL instruction is critical to closing achievement gaps among students with varying needs, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences,” says Christine Gouveia, Vice President of Applied Learning Sciences for McGraw-Hill Education’s School Group.



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The Relationship between SEL and Achievement

In schools across the country, educators are paying more attention to the importance of incorporating SEL into instruction at all grade levels – and with good reason.

“Research shows that academic learning is inextricably linked to social and emotional development,” Gouveia says. “We know that SEL is critical to a child’s development, and it’s critical to school-wide success. Research increasingly suggests that SEL programming leads to better student outcomes, such as enhanced academic performance, fewer conduct problems, and increased pro-social behaviors.”

For instance, a [meta-analysis](#) published in 2017 (Taylor et al.) reviewed 82 different school-based SEL interventions serving close to 100,000 children. Students who participated in these programs “fared significantly better” in academic performance, social skills, behavioral skills, and attitudes than their peers who did not have access to SEL instruction, the study found.

With an increasing focus on learning science research, which includes understanding how the brain develops and how children learn most effectively, “we’re able to support students better than ever before with SEL instruction,” Gouveia says. “We know through research that social and emotional skills can be developed. And we know this should be integrated holistically, across a variety of settings. SEL should be taught explicitly in the classroom and reinforced throughout the entire fabric of a school.”

The core competencies of SEL are critical to empowering any child, but for traditionally underserved populations such as ELs, a strong focus on these competencies can have a huge impact on their success in the classroom – and beyond.

Making Sure Everyone Feels Safe and Respected

For educators who work with ELs, the difficulties inherent in teaching a diverse set of students with varying needs aren’t new.

ELs are the fastest growing student population in the United States. [According to the U.S. Department of Education](#), there were 4.8 million ELs enrolled in the 2014-15 school year, which is 10 percent of the total K-12 population.

“Between the 2009-10 and 2014-15 school years, the percentage of ELs increased in about half the states, with an increase of 40 percent in five states,” says Ed Lamprich, Vice President of EL Strategy for McGraw-Hill Education’s School Group.



“Creating a classroom culture where every student feels respected, and treats others with respect, accelerates language acquisition and builds confidence in a student’s own proficiency.”

Although more than 75 percent of ELs in the United States speak Spanish as their home language, there are more than 400 languages spoken by U.S. students. Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Hmong, Russian, and Portuguese are also prevalent languages.

“English learners are a really diverse population, not only culturally but linguistically,” Lamprich says. “As ELs develop their skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, teachers might have students in the same classroom who are new to the country with no English skills, as well as students who are much farther along in terms of English proficiency. That creates a significant challenge, and teachers have told us that [they are interested in receiving more professional development training](#) so they can better meet their EL students’ needs.”

Research shows that if ELs are paired with students who are proficient in English, they learn the language faster. For instance, [Gernsten et al. \(2007\)](#) notes that peer-assisted learning, in which ELs interact with English-speaking partners during class time, generates feedback on language skills, forces syntactic processing, and challenges ELs to engage at higher proficiency levels.



However, this type of interaction requires students to build trusting, supportive relationships with each other, which is a core SEL competency. Without a school-wide focus on teaching students how to be kind and empathize with one another, ELs are likely to feel inhibited from engaging with their English-speaking peers.

“Nobody wants to feel vulnerable or different,” Lamprich says. “They want to fit in, and they don’t want to be laughed at. Language is one of those areas where you just put everything right out there, and you may get it wrong. You’re taking a huge risk.”

He adds: “Creating a classroom culture where every student feels respected, and treats others with respect, accelerates language acquisition and builds confidence in a student’s own proficiency.”

Navigating Cultural Differences

Another way that ELs can feel vulnerable or different is through their cultural identity. Educators must find ways to create safe and inclusive learning spaces that affirm each student’s culture, a task that relies on culturally responsive teaching practices.

This means embracing racial and ethnic diversity, valuing each student’s background and experience, recognizing and celebrating various cultures both inside and outside the classroom, and using curriculum materials that show people from different cultures. Studies suggest that ELs have the most success when they see their own cultural identity reflected in the curriculum and can relate their own experiences to it.

“In addition to learning a new language, ELs must acclimate to a new culture,” Gouveia says. “It’s important for educators to create learning environments that both validate students’ cultural identities and support this acclimation process.”

One of the five “[Guiding Principles of Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\)](#)” developed by the Applied Learning Sciences team at McGraw-Hill Education is to create a safe, nurturing environment for all students. To do this, Gouveia recommends that teachers develop classroom rules and expectations collaboratively with students, greet each student by name every day, reward positive behaviors, and teach students multiple strategies to work through conflict with their peers.

Lukens says it’s important for teachers not to take a one-size-fits-all approach in their classroom.

“Being culturally responsive also means being aware of how cultural values influence the learning process,” she explains. “Many ELs come from collectivist cultures, which value group achievements more than individual accomplishments. These students might not want to raise their hand to be called on individually, and they might prefer to work more in a group setting. In U.S. classrooms, the culture tends to be very individualistic. We should be mindful of these differences during instruction.”

Dealing with Trauma

One of the biggest challenges in teaching ELs is that many have experienced some form of trauma.

North Kansas City Schools serves about 1,400 English learners who speak 125 different languages. Some are immigrants or refugees from Asia, Africa, or the Middle East.

“Some of our refugees have lost friends and family to violence and have been displaced from their homes,” Lukens says. “Of course, there is a lack of basic health care in the refugee camps they have come from, as well as a lack of consistent education. Our refugees also experience a lot of trauma in their journey to the U.S.”



“We’re looking to create an environment where school becomes a place of order and dependability, and where students know what to expect, so they can focus on learning.”

In addition, many of these families have relocated to neighborhoods with high poverty and crime rates. Also, for the children of immigrants, some of whom might not be documented, there is constant anxiety over whether they (or their parents) will be deported.

Students who have experienced such adverse circumstances are more likely to have trouble concentrating on school and maintaining good behavior, and therefore they are at a greater risk of being suspended, expelled, held back, or classified with a disability. Focusing on SEL instruction, and using trauma-sensitive teaching practices, can help them regulate their emotions and make them feel safe and supported.

North Kansas City Schools has adopted strategies described in the book *Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Constant Stress*, by Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Alvarez-Ortiz, and Judy Haynes (ASCD Press, 2017). A key takeaway from this book is the need to develop “strength-based relationships” between teachers and students.

“We are focused on identifying students’ strengths, rather than their deficits,” Lukens explains. “It’s easy to look at a refugee who hasn’t had much formal education and think: ‘You don’t know anything.’ We want to turn that around and realize: This student has survived for years in a refugee camp, then made a difficult, dangerous journey out of that war-torn area, and so he or she must possess tremendous assets that can transfer to the student’s new environment. That’s what educators should look for.”

Giving students some control, and using predictable classroom routines, are important strategies as well. “We’re looking to create an environment where school becomes a place of order and dependability, and where students know what to expect, so they can focus on learning,” Lukens says.

Having ELs talk about their emotions can also be beneficial. This helps them learn to understand and regulate their emotions, while at the same time developing their English skills. “Providing structured opportunities for communicating about emotions helps reduce anxiety and also increases language acquisition for ELs,” Lukens says.

Family Engagement

CASEL notes that family engagement is [critical to effective SEL instruction](#). Unlike academic learning, so much of a student’s social and emotional development happens at home, and it’s important for educators and families to be on the same page in terms of priorities and learning strategies.



“Many times schools will work through community organizations and churches to provide EL training and offer a trusted haven for families.”

Yet, communicating with the families of EL students can be a challenge because of language and cultural barriers. Teachers need help in overcoming these barriers, and using technology to translate material into families’ home languages is one useful strategy. What’s more, administrators must provide opportunities for in-person meetings and make sure that families of ELs feel welcome in their schools.

Community partnerships can also play a critical role in engaging families and providing wraparound support services that allow ELs to succeed.

“Educators need to be aware of the compounding effect that culture shock can play with students who have experienced trauma and should be ready to intervene with outside resources if things get more intense than what they are prepared to deal with at school,” Lukens says. North Kansas City Schools has formed partnerships with refugee resettlement agencies, homeless shelters, and mental health agencies to help bring awareness to school personnel and provide additional support for students.

“It can be challenging to get families to come to school because of their own low English proficiency or comfort level. Many times schools will work through community organizations and churches to provide EL training and offer a trusted haven for families,” Lamprich observes.

A Complex Issue

The landscape of SEL for K-12 English learners is complex. ELs are a diverse population who have historically been underserved, and there are a number of reasons for this – including gaps in cultural awareness, barriers to family communication, and the role of trauma in their lives.

Creating a safe, nurturing environment for all students, adopting culturally responsive and trauma-sensitive teaching practices, building strength-based relationships with students, finding creative ways to engage with families, and turning to community organizations for support are all promising solutions.

“We can’t let our own bias, even if it is only implied bias, get in the way of reaching every EL or giving them support as they try to learn grade-level content in a language that is not their own,” says Lamprich.

“We still have a long way to go,” Gouveia concludes. “It’s incredibly complicated, but I’m hopeful that with these research-based practices for ELs, we are starting to make good progress.”



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