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Winter 5-5-2016

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2016

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Introduction

Educators of young children today wear many hats. Early childhood educators, especially, are tasked with imparting knowledge and skills that are foundational for future success. Within the last decade, much of the research on the connection between social emotional learning and academic success points to the necessity for children to have well developed social and emotional abilities (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). It has also been found that classrooms that incorporate social emotional learning are more engaging and provide children with skills that they can use in the real world (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). The goal of social emotional learning is to give children the necessary tools for navigating life; these tools include social skills for interacting and collaborating, emotional skills in order to regulate and express emotions, and problem solving skills that enable children to be engaged learners. It is also true that as adults, higher-order thinking skills like problem solving, communication, and self-management become essential in order to be a participating citizen in our society (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004). However, teachers are in the field unprepared to explicitly teach these critical skills to young children. Early childhood teachers have to meet the needs of children from preschool to 3rd grade, and the tools and strategies necessary to meet the needs of the children in this age range vary greatly due to the significant developmental changes throughout these critical years.

My interest in the connection between social emotional learning and academic achievement came about during my time as a teaching intern at the end of my teacher education program. I spent two semesters in very different placements; one placement was in an early childhood center that was accredited by the National Association of the Education of Young

Children, where research and best practices were very highly valued, and another semester in a 3rd grade classroom in a public school that set rigorous standards for students and teachers alike, with a heavy focus on standardized testing. Both settings approached social emotional learning very differently, with very different results.

It is our job as educators to determine how best to build up our young students' social and emotional skills so that they succeed in school. We must give them the tools to value themselves and their work, to collaborate with their peers, to make lasting relationships, and to eventually grow to find their place in the world. We must also teach them to be problem solvers who love to learn, and teach them the skills to collaborate and work independently without constant external motivation. The goal of this paper is to examine the difference between a classroom where social emotional learning is explicitly taught to children, and a classroom where it is not, and consider how social emotional learning impacted the students' social and emotional abilities in the context of the classroom.

Preschool Teaching Internship

At the early childhood center, the class size was under 16 students, there were 6 adults in the room - 4 interns, one assistant teacher, and one lead teacher - and every intern had a small group of children for individualized lessons. The student population was mostly African American children ranging in age from 2 to 4 years of age. The majority of the children attended the school for free through a state grant for low income families. As an intern, fresh from a semester as a pre-student teaching intern, the center was full of practices that required me to break what I would later realize were bad habits.

Language and communication were the cornerstone for learning at this center. Teachers did not praise children or their work. When a child asked "Is this good?" or "Do you like this?"

teachers used phrases starting with "I notice" or specific questions about the work that turned the child's attention back to their feelings or opinions about their own work. This concept was very new for myself and the other teaching interns, even though we were nearly at the end of our teacher education programs. What made this so difficult was the force inside of myself to want to build relationships with these young children; I wanted them to feel good about themselves and I wanted to be the person to give them that validation when they asked for it. But as I soon realized, young children do not need validation like they may need other forms of care, and I could see the results of the center's language strategy within a month. Children who began school in the beginning of the year who constantly sought validation from the adults in the classroom began sharing their work proudly rather than asking for my opinion. Children began using the same type of language we used to describe their thoughts and their opinions. Children were proud of their work, and even began to look critically at it. One child held up a picture to share with me, then snatched it back as they said "Wait a minute, I can add some detail!" The word detail is certainly one that came from an adult in the room, but that child was using it to think about their own work because of the language we used with them. At 3 or 4 years old, these children were learning to value their thoughts and opinions, and their own hard work, without looking to an adult for validation. We trained ourselves out of giving praise, and while the concept was not easy to implement at first, the value made itself clear as the children's independence grew throughout the semester.

3rd Grade Teaching Internship

On the other hand, one week into my second semester of teacher internship at a public elementary school and I realized that teachers there took a very different approach to the social emotional learning of their students, and the social and emotional skills looked very different in

older children. This elementary school, which served primarily low income families who spoke English as a second language, had different challenges than I had seen at the early childhood center. More than one third of my classroom were children who had been in the country less than 2 years. The children in the classroom ranged from emergent reading levels to just below grade level, with children evenly spread along the levels in between. My classroom had 25 children, mostly 8- and 9-year old children, and they were required to take at least three major standardized tests a year. The learning in this school was not centered on the social and emotional development of the students, but on academic performance. When children asked "Is this good?" they received an answer like "yes" or "maybe you should fix this" that shut down conversation about their work and focused the child's attention on the approval of the teacher with no explanation of how to improve or achieve more. The teacher's expectations were not very clear to begin with, which exacerbated the problem of children seeking validation at every step. Children were rarely given the opportunity to go back and look carefully at their work, given that there were too many standards to meet and not enough time to meet them in the school year.

There did happen to be a staff meeting where the concept of praise was discussed. Teachers and staff looked at research together and discussed the pros and cons of moving away from praise and implementing more conversation about how children felt about themselves and their work in the classroom. The research promoted self motivation and regulation rather than relying on teachers to be the motivators and regulators. I watched staff members attempt to correct their use of the "I like" or "that's great" phrases, and I understood their struggle. However, many staff members gave up within the month, as the discussion was never continued.

Different Teacher-Child Interactions

The difference in the children at the early childhood center and at the public elementary school was very startling. All obvious differences aside, including developmental age, culture, and school values, I had watched 14 children that were 3- and 4- year olds grow into their independence by learning how to utilize important SEL skills. The younger children were adept at developmentally appropriate independent work and self motivation, where the the 8- and 9- year old 3rd grade children had trouble finishing tasks independently. They were never consistently or explicitly taught how to regulate themselves or motivate themselves, so they did not, even though they should have been able to at their age.

Statement of the Problem

Although research has shown that social emotional learning is integrated into the content standards for young children in all subject areas, children are still not being given enough SEL instruction nor are they receiving quality SEL instruction beyond preschool. There are many standards that require complex SEL abilities, such as inferring the emotions of characters in literature (Kress et. al., 2004). However, while those abilities are  included in many of the standards, teachers do not know what to do in order to teach them along with the rest of the content, or they do not take the time to do so. In order to infer emotions, children must know how to both perform the task of reading and comprehending the text, but they also must be able to identify the emotions of others and the cause of those emotions. In my experience, teachers spend time reading the text and discussing the content, but assume that the children can complete the emotional processes without instruction. This is only one example of the ways that SEL is integrated into the state content standards, but in my experience, the SEL portion of these standards is often left off because teachers assume that the children have come to them already

capable of using these skills. Because of this assumption, I saw children struggling with academic tasks because they were expected to use SEL skills that they did not seem to have. Despite SEL skills being integrated into the standards that teachers were teaching, those skills were not the focus of the lesson; they were barely mentioned at all. While SEL was highly valued in the early childhood setting, I did not see SEL skills explicitly taught in the 3rd grade classroom, although the children were expected to have the skills to complete academic tasks. This is a problem that must be addressed in order to make sure that students are receiving quality SEL instruction to give them crucial skills to succeed both academically and in life.

Defining Social Emotional Learning

In order to discuss teaching young children social emotional learning, we must know what skills are included in SEL. Social emotional learning is an umbrella term that refers to the set of skills and abilities students need to be successful not only in a learning environment, but in life. SEL encompasses social skills, emotional processes, and cognitive regulation (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Under these three domains, there are many significant skills that can be observed in the classroom. Social skills include skills like communication, relationship building, and empathy, emotional processes are skills like emotional regulation or the expression of emotions, and cognitive regulation includes self-monitoring and self-awareness. These three domains work together to support academic learning. It is important to consider how some of these skills look at different grade levels and what kinds of interactions between teachers and children promote these skills.

Self-Awareness

  Self-awareness is a foundational skill in social emotional learning. It includes children identifying their own emotions and the situation or circumstances that brought about that emotion (Norris, 2003). This skill is foundational because young children should be able to identify their emotions in order to help regulate their emotions or to problem solve. It is also a skill that is focused on introspection; while this does not come naturally to younger children, it is suited to young children's developmental stages. Preschool children, especially, are egocentric, and learning to identify their emotions is a developmentally appropriate task, when other tasks such as empathy may take more time to develop (Trawick-Smith, 2014, pp. 310-343). However, self-awareness is crucial to social emotional learning no matter the grade level because it is tied to all of the domains of SEL. Children must be able to identify their emotions and their causes in order to understand the emotions in others; also, as much as self-awareness is an emotional process, it is also a cognitive regulation process because children must think about their own emotions and consider what caused them, which is a metacognitive skill.

  In my preschool classroom, I worked with a child who was returning to the center for his second year. Because the child already knew the school routine, he served as a wonderful model for self-awareness for all of the other children in the class. During the first week of school, when the children were still learning the routines for school and testing out the waters with both teachers and peers alike, one child was having trouble sharing at the water table. The returning child was exploring the water table when the conflict arose, and he stepped in by reaching for the object that had started the conflict. Clearly, the returning child had witnessed many conflict resolution sessions, because he took on the role of the teacher and asked the other children to tell how they felt about the situation. He held up a hand after they were finished speaking, and told

them that he used to be upset when other people took the toys he wanted to play with, but there were other toys, so they should make another choice so that they could feel happy again. This child demonstrated self-awareness through the same structure that teachers used to develop the skill, and he gave them an example of how he had felt in the past in order to show them that it would all be ok. This child also demonstrated how effective SEL can be when implemented in the classroom.

In 3rd grade, my students rarely had an opportunity to think about their emotions in relation to classroom situations. There was a student who complained every time the class transitioned into Social Studies. She would interrupt the classroom teacher or myself when we began to give transition instructions and voice how much she did not want to participate in a social studies lesson. Every time she complained, she was asked to stop and told that she did not have a choice. Often, she would frown or cross her arms throughout the transition, and then she was not engaged in the lesson. She stared around the room, put her head on her arms, or whispered with a neighbor until the punishment for complaining was escalated to something worse. She was never asked to identify why she did not enjoy social studies, and I believe that part of the reason she continued to complain every time despite the punishment was because she never got to fully express why she was so displeased with the subject. The classroom teacher tried to be proactive, eventually, by warning her that if she complained about the lesson, she would be punished. This strategy took away the child's voice, and eliminated the need for self-awareness by shutting down the entire discussion and avoiding the problem.

Self-Monitoring

Self monitoring falls under the cognitive regulation domain of social emotional learning. Focusing on tasks, setting goals, motivation, and working hard to do best work are all aspects of

self-monitoring (Norris, 2003). These skills are crucial for academic success because they are necessary for children to complete academic tasks. Without focus, goals, and motivation, children cannot complete tasks or show what they know in order for teachers to assess them. Furthermore, in my time in the 3rd grade classroom, these are the skills that children were asked to use the most even though I never saw any explicit teaching of these tasks.

In the small group that I worked with in my semester at the early childhood center, self-monitoring was something that I taught explicitly as the need arose. During a unit about bread, we decided we wanted to bake bread from scratch, and that required many self-monitoring skills that the children in my group struggled with, such as focus. The first time that we attempted bread, the children took control of the lesson and lost focus on the task. The goal of the lesson was to make bread; the children were preoccupied by the ingredients and exploring sensory details like texture and smell. As the lesson continued, I gathered the children's attention and talked about the goal again; I reminded them that we were going to use the ingredients to make bread, and that in order to do so, we would need to start following the recipe. When we began adding the ingredients into the mixing bowl, the children's focus shifted to whose turn it was to add ingredients and use the tools. As an educator with limited classroom experience with 4-year olds, I had not mastered how to bring the focus back to the task at hand, and realized that the only way I would accomplish my goal would be to teach self-monitoring to the children and then apply it to the lesson.

The next day, we went back to the task of making bread dough. First, I had adapted the lesson to the children's interest, and I allowed them a few minutes to explore the ingredients. Then, I began to model self-monitoring. I provided a "think aloud" for the children, where I went through the process of baking bread while telling the children what I was thinking to keep myself

on task. I returned the focus to the goal of the lesson by bringing back an old lesson that sequenced the bread making process. Once we had reviewed the process, I decided that each child would make their own small batch of bread dough in order to give the children practice for the independence that self-monitoring promotes. I gave each child separate bowls with ingredients pre-measured, and I explained that we would all be making our own bread. When I asked the children to get started, I also mixed ingredients together to model how to stir and combine them. While we worked on the task, I continued to think out loud for the children. I talked about the sequence, mentioning what I was doing and then what would come next, and I shared my excitement about sharing bread after it was done baking. As we worked, I reminded the children that even though it was difficult to mix and knead the dough, I thought it would be worth it to eat the bread. Engaging the children with modeling as they worked helped focus them on the task, as well as taking away the distraction of the social skills. I chose to dig into self-monitoring for this lesson rather than the social skills because I wanted the children to experience the bread making process individually and I was aware that the children in my group did well with others in play situations most other times. After this lesson, I learned to model more and give more time for individual tasks when necessary in order to build stamina and focus for tasks. Developmentally, it was not reasonable to ask for focus and effort from 4-year olds who are presented with new materials to explore, but I saw the children's ability to self-monitor grow throughout the semester because of the scaffolded, modeled lessons that I created for certain tasks.

In the 3rd grade classroom, there was one child who struggled with self-monitoring. During whole group lessons, he was not engaged. When he was assigned an independent task, he often did not meet the expectations of the teacher, or he failed to complete the task at all. Even

when the whole class was given instructions to transition, this child would sit at his desk while the rest of the class moved to follow the directions. He was unaware of what was happening around him most of the time, and did not seem to be able to focus on instructions, no matter how many times they were given. Even working one on one with a teacher did not guarantee that this child would follow the instructions. He consistently turned in spelling tests with missing words, and came to school without homework, claiming that he did it but he forgot it, or he forgot to write it in his planner.

To help this student, I began working one-on-one with him. I went through academic tasks with him, guiding him through questions or helping him express his thoughts before writing them down. I also gave him more of my own focus than other children in the class, trying to keep him engaged by giving him verbal and nonverbal reminders throughout lessons. Over and over again, his classroom teacher asked him to focus. She asked him to complete tasks, and when he did not, she broke the tasks down into pieces to help him or assigned him to me in order to get one-on-one help. Even when I used a strategy that I thought would help, such as creating a graphic organizer for his writing rather than handing him a piece of lined paper and asking for him to write paragraphs, I realized after reflection that my own goals for helping this student were more focused on getting him to do the work properly rather than teaching him the skills he needed to be an independent learner. All of the hours I spent putting work into adapting lessons and reframing tasks to meet this child's needs could have been spent helping him practice self-monitoring and I could have spent more time with more of the students in the classroom. This child performed well on tests, displayed the ability to absorb and apply new information, and could orally express his thoughts well. Despite all of this, which was observed throughout the semester, this child was considered for retention and was required to attend summer school in

order to qualify to move on to the fourth grade. What he needed most was explicit instruction in self-monitoring, but instead he was thrown more academic tasks that he struggled with because of his inability to self-monitor. Self-monitoring is what life-long learners need; it includes optimism and the drive and focus to complete tasks, and without it, no matter how bright a young child is, they cannot display what they know in the way that public schools often demand.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation could also be referred to as emotional regulation. This is tied to emotional processes in SEL. It includes controlling extreme emotions, identifying emotions and the causes of those emotions, and "recognizing strengths in and mobilizing positive feelings about self, school, family, and support networks" (Norris 2003). Self-regulation can go hand in hand with self-awareness. Once children identify emotions, they can use strategies to regulate that emotion, or once children regulate their emotions, they can consider what they are feeling and reflect on why they are feeling that emotion.

In early childhood, regulating emotions is a skill that can make or break a child's experience in the classroom. At the early childhood center, I worked with a 4-year old child who became aggressive when another child did anything with which he did not agree. If another child tried to sit where he wanted to sit, he would strike out at the child. If I was on his level, face to face, in order to talk with him, he would lash out at me with a fist. If another child took a toy that he wanted to play with, he would push the child or pull on the toy, often resulting in one of the children being knocked into furniture or knocked to the ground. In order to teach this child , I used conflict resolution and carefully constructed language for the children to use. First, I shared what I noticed about the children's faces or  about what I had seen happen between them. For example, I would say "I noticed that you look very upset right now. Could you please tell me

what happened?" Then, I would have each child tell me about what happened. This allowed each child to share their own viewpoint, which helped reinforce the idea that other people see things differently. Then, the children shared how they felt about what happened. After that, I would encourage the children to share how they thought they should solve the problem between them. If the incident with the child who became aggressive was one where he hit another student, I prefaced the conflict resolution with a one-on-one discussion between the teacher and the child in order to give him the words to use rather than resort to violence. I first asked about the emotions he felt before he lashed out, and referred to the emotions chart which provided facial expressions. Then, I firmly told the child that it was never ok to use his hands to hurt others. We also practiced using "safe" hands with other people, including hugs, holding hands, and carefully touching another person's arm. After that, we would begin the conflict resolution project. Often, I would have to suggest a resolution for the children, and I always included practicing using safe hands so that the child could practice in a controlled situation. Using a combination of language skills, physical demonstrations, modeling, and social skills development, this child was using phrases that I gave him with other children independently and rarely resorted to aggressive behavior. The child also learned to ask an adult for help if his words did not work, which was a result of both the repeated intervention strategies with the same adults, and the relationship that the child had with those adults.

In the 3rd grade classroom, children did not have time for practicing self-regulation. When children in the class were off task or talking when they should not have been, they were asked to change the color of their behavior card. Children started on green every day, and the color gradually moved on through yellow, orange, red, and then blue, which earned the student a detention. One child, who often displayed disruptive behavior throughout the day, frequently

became upset when he was asked to move his card. Even when he had been given several warnings, the act of moving his card always elicited strong emotions that disrupted his learning because of the time spent trying to regulate his emotions. The problem with moving cards was that it shut down all communication about how the child felt about the situation or discussion on what could be done between the child and the teacher in order to improve the situation. Card moving effectively silenced both the teacher and the student because it was meant to be a quick punishment that did not disrupt the rest of the class, but instead it became a source of emotional outbursts, particularly from one student. The children were not given outlets for their emotions, and were not given strategies for calming down; often, if a child was having a hard time self-regulating, they were asked to step into the bathroom or the hall until they got themselves under control.

Social Skills

Social skills is a broad domain that includes many aspects of how people interact. Social skills includes emotional processes like managing and expressing emotions in order to build and maintain relationships, leadership skills, the ability to show sensitivity to social cues, problem solving skills in social situations, and the ability to collaborate effectively with others in group situations (Norris, 2003). In my experience, social skills are more frequently explicitly taught in the classroom because classrooms rely on partner and group work; also, classroom management is closely linked to social interactions between the children and the teacher.

In the preschool, social interactions are explicitly taught as soon as children arrive for the school year because of where children are developmentally as they enter preschool. Children in preschool rely on their relationships with adults in order to learn social skills (Trawick-Smith, 2014, pp. 310-343). At the early childhood center, conflict resolution was the most frequently

used vehicle for instruction. Conflict resolution effectively taught children skills in other domains of SEL, such as self-awareness, but it was focused mostly on the interactions and relationships between the children. One child in particular struggled with the solution part of conflict resolution. She could retell her point of view, listen to the other child's point of view, and identify her emotions and the other child's emotions. As soon as we began to talk about solutions to the problem, the child would refuse any solution that did not give her what she wanted. Even though she could name the emotions and recognized them in other children, she was not applying those emotions to the situation and could not consider any other point of view. Egocentrism is developmentally appropriate for children her age, but the purpose of conflict resolution was to give children practice with many SEL skills. The child was an only child at home, and had little experience with other children her age, so we decided to focus on social skills with her and give her more opportunities for practice. In small group, I planned lessons that required sharing and compromise between the children. In a controlled setting with only three children and an adult who was focused on the interactions and modeling the skill, the child was much more receptive. Also, the controlled lessons eliminated the strong emotions that required regulation in a situation where conflict arose during self-selection time. After a month of getting used to the routine, the other children, and the process of conflict resolution, the child began to allow compromise during conflict resolution where both children left the situation satisfied.

In the 3rd grade classroom, social skills look very different because of the difference in age and the approach to teaching social skills. Where the early childhood center had based all problem solving around conflict resolution that was driven by the interactions of the children, and was full of practice for multiple SEL skills, the 3rd grade students relied on the teacher to be the main regulator of social interactions and problem solving. One problem that I saw that was

prevalent throughout the classroom was the tattling epidemic. Any conflict that arose between students turned into a shouting match where children would point fingers and run to a teacher in order to explain what another child had done that was against classroom rules. The problem with trying to resolve conflict in 3rd grade was that it was always a case of one child's word against the other's, and trying to determine who was telling the truth was difficult. In the classroom, there was no discussion of emotions or possible solutions. Children were either sent to move their card color, or they were assigned apology letters. Aside from the fact that the way the problems were solved were not coming from the children, the "resolution" was using writing as a punishment when writing should have been promoted as something positive and engaging. Using this strategy, both children often left the conflict frustrated, and no SEL skills were practiced. Children were not practicing social skills by strengthening their relationships, and the relationship with their teacher was not strengthened either because there was no discussion or emotion in the solution, only a directive that punished one or both students for having a conflict.

Social Emotional Learning and Academic Achievement

Research has shown that social emotional learning programs are linked to academic success. The key to actually achieving the academic success is to have a SEL program that is designed and implemented in the right way (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). SEL programs cannot just be a one-way transfer of knowledge from a teacher to a student. No meaningful learning is imparted that way. Social emotional learning depends on many factors to be successful, and academic success is closely tied to those factors.

In Figure 1 of Jones and Bouffard's work, the major pieces of a well-designed SEL program are mapped out in order to visually show the connections between the most important aspects (2012). The three domains of social emotional learning are in the center, as they are the

core of SEL and break the broad topic into manageable pieces. Each domain is connected to the factors that affect its success. The bottom of the chart has the largest heading, which is the community context and state/district policy. This is connected to long-term outcomes and school/classroom outcomes. Policy dictates the goals that the school districts want to meet with the SEL program, and what SEL will look like in the schools and classrooms. The classroom context addresses what should already be in place in the classroom in order for a SEL program to be successful, like effective classroom management, positive relationships, and instructional support from the teachers. There is also an outline for what SEL will look like in the room, with intentional skills instruction and time for practicing those skills. The school and classroom context is connected to the emotional processes because it ensures that the classroom environment is a safe, engaging place for young learners. The social skills domain is connected to the short- and long-term goals of SEL programs. Goals include attention, social competence, behavior, and academic achievement, which are all connected to the social interactions and relationships in the classroom. Finally, the last important aspect of an effective SEL program is the teacher's social emotional competence. If a teacher does not have the experience or self-awareness to demonstrate their competence in the subject, they will not be able to effectively teach it to young children.

All of these aspects are interconnected because SEL is a complex structure that includes a broad range of important skills. Without any one of the aspects included on this map, a program cannot be effective because it is not attending to the entire complex group of skills that children need in order to be successful.

Teacher Self-Reflection

In order to be an effective educator in any subject, teachers must be trained experts. In order to teach fractions, teachers must have a deep understanding of fractions in order to facilitate learning and help children apply the concepts. The same is true about social emotional learning. Teachers cannot expect children to learn social skills, emotional processes, and cognitive regulation if the teachers themselves do not have those skills. One key to determining whether or not teachers have these skills and abilities is through self-reflection. Teachers should already be reflective practitioners, but applying self-reflection to SEL is key to implementing SEL in the classroom because teachers must be knowledgeable about what they are teaching the children in their classroom. Kremenitzer provides a framework for teachers that can help teachers reflect on their own social and emotional abilities (2003). Below, I have provided examples of Kremenitzer's questions in order to reflect on my own experiences and to learn more about my social and emotional abilities.

Self-Reflection Questions

All of Kremenitzer's questions require me to look back at moments in my teaching experience to reflect about myself and my emotional competence. Because I took the reflect, I can acknowledge what my strengths are and consider how to work on the areas where I know that there could still be growth. All educators should be reflecting on their practice, and the questions that guide reflection about SEL allow teachers to consider where they need to strengthen their abilities and how that might impact how they are implementing SEL in their classrooms. I know that I need to work on finding the right words to express my emotions, so that is something that I need to practice more often in order to successfully implement it into my classroom.

*"Am I good at identifying how I am feeling?"* I believe that I am good at identifying my emotions. I have had times in the classroom when I feel myself getting frustrated with children, whether it is due to disruptive behavior or emotional situations that I cannot solve easily, and I know how to take a step back and breathe before going back to the challenge. I feel that I am able to easily identify how I am feeling and what has caused my emotions.

*"Am I able to notice when my students are angry, sad, bored, etc.?"* I believe that one of my strengths in the classroom is my ability to read my students' emotions. I can see boredom in my students when they fidget or disruptive behavior increases. I can see when students are upset with me when we have a disagreement about acceptable behavior, and I try to provide an option for a brain break or comfort in order for those students who are angry or upset to calm themselves and refocus before moving back into an academic task. The best part of teaching, for me, is the relationships I form with my students, and I can best serve them by knowing them as individuals. Being able to read their emotions is crucial to being able to meet their needs as their teacher.

*"Can I identify optimal times for my students to work on certain projects?"* This skill does not come easily, but I believe that I have gotten better at reading the classroom and knowing when my students can handle certain tasks. In my preschool classroom experience, I knew that the transition from arrival time into morning meeting was difficult because children only had a short time to engage with the centers before they had to come together in a group. I quickly realized that certain activities that required more time and stamina should not be made available until after morning meeting in order to smoothly transition the children through the morning routine. Also, in my 3rd grade classroom experience, there were certain days of the week where the children were out of the room for extra curricular subjects, and often after those

subjects the students were more focused, so I planned certain lessons for certain days in order to take advantage of this pattern. I believe that I started my practice in the 3rd grade classroom trying to stay very closely to my planned schedule, but I learned to be flexible and to read my students, and ultimately, we got more done in the classroom with that flexibility than we would have if the students had not been ready to learn and I pushed a lesson through to stick to the schedule.

*"Am I good at finding the right words to express my feelings?"* This is an area where I believe I still have room to grow. I have found that I expect people to know how I feel based on the situation, and that is unreasonable. In the preschool setting, I constantly modeled using my words in order to show how I was feeling so that the children would use their words, too, and I have tried to work on sharing more about how I am feeling in a constructive way that does not have negative effects on other people.

*"Am I able to self-regulate my behavior even under very difficult circumstances?"* One time, in my 3rd grade classroom, I was nearly brought to tears by my class. It was the first week, and I was trying to transition the children from working on a large project to music class. No matter what I did, I could not get the children to stop talking long enough for anybody to hear my directions. I used the classroom signals, but only two children would respond. As a new teacher to these students, they were not used to me, and they tested me in various ways the first few weeks, but I was coming from a class where I had been respected by my students and I had established relationships with them so that we could work together. By the time I got the students into a line and fairly quiet, I was nearly in tears because of my frustration. Intellectually, I knew that I needed to earn the respect of the children and to get to know them in order to build relationships with them and to establish my place in the classroom, but I wanted so badly to be

able to show that I was a competent educator, and in that moment I felt that I may not be able to do it because I was upset with my performance. I decided to use my words to express how I was feeling, rather than snap at the students or punish them for their behavior. I told them how frustrating it was for me because I was trying to help them follow the class rules and trying to help them get to class on time. I also expressed my concerns that I was not doing enough to earn their respect. After I told them how I felt, they apologized and the rest of the day was much better. I believe that I handled the situation well even though I was very emotional. I had expected the type of respect the children gave their classroom teacher, but had forgotten the importance of building the relationships. Once I took a moment to breathe and expressed how I was feeling, the situation resolved itself.

Conclusion

There is still much work to be done to fully integrate successful social emotional learning instruction into the classroom. My own experiences with young children and my reflection on my practice allowed me to explore what social emotional learning can look like at different grade levels and allowed me to compare different SEL strategies. The common factor in all of my experiences was the relationship between the teacher and the child and their interactions. Ultimately, all teaching is about relationships; there have to be relationships in order for learning to be exchanged. With this in mind, there is one final thought to consider. Social emotional learning must be intentional and must be focused on the relationships between the domains of SEL. The danger here is that SEL becomes a way to control child behavior and manage a classroom, rather than teaching SEL in order to develop skills that are important for success not only in school but in life (Hoffman, 2009). Using SEL as a way to teach students to sit down, focus, and complete a task does not give them a skill that they can use in the real world. SEL

must be thoughtfully planned and the relationship between students and teachers should be what informs that planning, as should any other subject matter being taught. Classrooms should be communities, where each child is a citizen and everyone's voice can be heard. In communities, people interact, work together, problem solve, and value one another, and SEL can be the foundation for great learning to occur. If young children learn social and emotional skills in the classroom alongside content standards, they take those skills with them throughout their education and out into the world. All of the skills that are wrapped into social emotional learning are stepping stones to bettering our interactions with other people and our abilities to achieve great things.

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