Social-Emotional Learning in the Primary Curriculum

Every primary grade program needs a carefully planned social-emotional component. All children—those who enter first or second grade with an ability to control their emotions and make friends and those for whom these skills are more difficult—benefit from intentional teaching in this area.

A synthesis of research on development during the early years prepared by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) indicates that emotional well-being and social competence provide a strong foundation for brain development and emerging cognitive abilities. The council’s report further indicates that language learning is dependent not only on the ability to differentiate sounds and the capacity to link meaning to specific words, but also on the ability to concentrate, pay attention, and engage in meaningful social interaction. These behaviors influence all areas of development, including academic, social, physical health, and the immune system. They also affect how the individual functions later in life both in personal situations and in the workplace.

Social-emotional development is clearly a key foundation for school success. The questions for educators are apparent: What can primary grade teachers do to help children master social-emotional skills? How do we make these skills an integral part of the curriculum, thereby supporting academic learning and lifelong development? How best can we implement social-emotional curricula and thus make a difference in children’s lives—present and future?

Approaches to building social skills

Some school systems adopt a schoolwide approach to social-emotional learning, while others use a particular approach across a grade level. Three programs that may be implemented at grade level and also lend themselves to schoolwide use are Responsive Classroom, Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum, and Interplay Solutions. In addition to using one or more of these programs, some school systems and some teachers develop their own activities for building a social-emotional curriculum. The sections that follow describe these programs and a teacher-created activity and indicate how three Massachusetts school systems have implemented or been impacted by them.

Mary Mindess, Min-hua Chen, and Ronda Brenner

Mary Mindess, MEd, is professor of early childhood education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She teaches online and face-to-face courses related to children with behavior problems. For many years she organized the New England Kindergarten Conference and Reggio Emilia-inspired institutes. mmindess@lesley.edu

Min-hua Chen, EdD, is an early childhood education specialist for Elementary School Services in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. She has been a coordinator for the Massachusetts Kindergarten Curriculum and Teacher Leadership Project and a training consultant for early childhood programs. mchen@doe.mass.edu

Ronda Brenner, MEd, is the assistant principal of the Columbus Elementary School in Medford, Massachusetts. She has worked in the early childhood and elementary education field for many years as a classroom teacher, teacher specialist, and educational consultant and currently as an administrator. rbrenner@medford.k12.ma.us

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) works to improve instruction, curriculum, and administration in education programs for young children and their families. Of Primary Interest is written by members of NAECS/SDE for kindergarten and primary teachers. The column appears in March, July, and November issues of Young Children and Beyond the Journal.
Responsive Classroom

Many teachers at various grade levels in the Cambridge Public Schools use the Responsive Classroom, an approach developed by Northeast Foundation for Children for teaching social-emotional skills. The teachers became interested in this approach because it emphasizes the link between the social-emotional realm and academic curriculum. Teachers trained in the Responsive Classroom approach share a common set of values, vocabulary, and skills for the social-emotional domain. Teacher language and child language are important components of the program, and children respond well to the schoolwide consistency. Responsive Classroom strategies include engaging children in the formulation of rules, guided discovery and academic choice, and collaborative problem solving.

The kindergarten program at the Amigos School, a two-way immersion program in the Cambridge Public Schools, is an example of the Responsive Classroom in action. As the children prepare for the grand opening of the water table, which contains materials for scientific exploration of water flow, the teacher asks, “What rules should we adopt for working at the water table?” The children respond, “We need to wear smocks to stay dry” and “We need to keep the water inside the water table.” With the help of one child, the teacher models the use of equipment, such as plastic tubes and containers, and asks open-ended questions to guide the discovery process. As the children conduct investigations at the water table, they collaborate in their explorations and engage in cooperative problem solving. The social-emotional aspects of the curriculum are clearly integrated with the academic components.

Following the morning meeting, the kindergartners choose a learning station at which to work. The water table is one of eight stations. At the end of the morning, children do an evaluation activity. Each child writes or draws a report explaining the learning that took place in the morning activities. Preparing the report engages children in self-reflection and deepens their understanding of their learning experiences. The reports address children’s learning in science (discoveries related to how water flows, the size and position of different containers) and mathematics (observations of and naming container shapes), and their individual development in the areas of writing and art. The reports serve as authentic assessments of each child’s progress. They are evidence of the Responsive Classroom’s support for children’s social-emotional development.

The focus on open-ended questions, clearly a component of the Amigos kindergarten program, also pervades an in-service/preservice project carried out at the Peabody School in Cambridge. In this project, classroom teachers and Lesley College professors took part in ongoing discussions of Paula Denton’s book, *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn* (2007), a publication directly related to the Responsive Classroom approach. One of the themes the book emphasizes is asking open-ended questions in both the social-emotional and cognitive realms. In-service teachers’ classroom reflections and preservice teachers’ observation/reflection assignments attested to the value of the Responsive Classroom experience for children.

Second Step: A Violence Prevention Program

The Medford Public Schools adopted Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum, which integrates social-emotional and academic learning. Developed by the Committee for Children, the program specifically addresses empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger/emotion management. The committee grounded the program’s approach in research about cognitive behavioral therapy showing that thoughts affect people’s social interactions (Committee for Children 2002).

The Second Step program is organized into grade-level kits, each containing various tools for teaching (for example, puppets, an audio tape, a video, posters). Every kit includes lesson cards divided into key units. Lesson cards for the primary grades have a realistic photograph on one
side and a lesson for the teacher’s use on the other side. The lesson includes clear objectives, a short story about the photograph, discussion questions, role-play/pretend scenarios and/or activity suggestions, and wrap-up ideas. The lesson cards offer activities to help children transfer the unit’s skills to their everyday lives, activities that extend the learning, and take-home reminders—part of the curriculum’s family connections. The reminders include Take-Home Letters describing the lesson, what the children are learning, and how families can help their children use these new skills.

During Lesson 3, the teacher in a first grade classroom at the Columbus Elementary School facilitates a class meeting in which she shares three lesson cards with photographs of children in various situations. The children in the photos display different emotions (a surprised child opening a present; a disgusted child pulling gum off the bottom of her shoe; a scared child looking through a rain-soaked window). The teacher leads a discussion about feelings and situational clues. Holding up one of the photographs, she asks the children to look carefully at the child’s face and the situation the child is in. She invites the class to share their thoughts about what the child in the photograph may be feeling and why. The lesson includes role-playing and a quick wrap-up.

At the end of the lesson, as part of the transfer of learning, the teacher challenges students to “Remember the Day”—that is, to remember a time when they felt a particular emotion. Children identify a feeling and pretend to feel that way while the teacher snaps their picture. They affix the photo to their feelings recording sheet and briefly write about the feeling and the time they remember experiencing it. The children draw pictures to complement the writing and have the option of finding a picture from a magazine of a child who appears to be feeling that same emotion.

Since the Columbus Elementary School’s adoption of Second Step, teachers and families report improvements in children’s behavior. With initial support from an early childhood mental health grant provided by the state, Medford has assessed the changes at the school through annual teacher surveys and focus groups as well as family focus groups. Through pre- and postassessments, it is clear that teachers and parents observe significantly more children demonstrating skills that help them to think before impulsively reacting to a situation.

**Interplay Solutions**

Interplay Solutions offers another approach to helping primary school children increase their social-emotional skills. This approach, presented at an Early Childhood Institute held at Lesley University in 2006 and repeated in 2007, has attracted the attention of many Massachusetts teachers. In the words of one teacher, the approach, “uses stories, role plays, and structured activities to develop supportive classroom communities and help students learn the basic behavioral and social skills necessary for successful group learning.”

The stories and related role-playing activities are springboards for exploring social-emotional attitudes and skills. The stories’ characters model the process of change as they adopt effective behaviors to meet and overcome challenges. For example, in the story “Quiet Hawk,” first-graders hear about a child learning to hunt. In the story, a young pioneer boy struggles to learn a new skill. The boy develops the skill to tune in and pay attention. As the children listen, they learn that paying attention leads to success (Shub & DeWeerd 2006). Children have multiple opportunities to act out the adventure. The related activities give the entire class a chance to master the metaphorical lesson: We all have the power to tune in and pay attention.

The unusual feature of “Quiet Hawk” is the action-oriented detail it provides to help children understand what it means to tune in and pay attention. The Interplay Solutions program uses many strategies to assess children’s mastery of the social skills emphasized in the units. With the “Quiet Hawk” story, children create their own shields and earn a feather for their
shield each time the teacher notices them focusing on their work. Another strategy is the Pal Bulletin Board. Children write and post pal notes describing how others have helped them master the strategy on which the class is working.

A teacher-developed activity

In Hudson Public Schools Kindergarten Center, children create books as part of a systemwide literacy effort. One such book commemorates the 100th day of school. It focuses on 100 Acts of Kindness and is part of a community service project that integrates academic curriculum (literacy, mathematics, and art) with the nurturing of social consciousness (kindness). The children interview family and friends and identify kind acts they can do. Then they record their acts in the heart shape on the paper provided by the teacher.

Before the book is put together, a preview goes home to each family, so they can write comments. The comments, along with a copy of the “I Love You” song the children have been singing, are added to the children’s pages. School staff, with assistance from the parents, assemble the pages, and the teacher presents a spiral-bound copy of the book to each child. It becomes one of the child’s (and the family’s) favorite books to read. The total experience integrates academic learning and social skills development.

To Learn More . . .

Read online about these three programs:
Interplay Solutions, Valatie, New York—
www.interplaysolutions.com
Responsive Classroom, Northeast Foundation for Children Inc., Turner Falls, Massachusetts—
www.responsiveclassroom.org
Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum, Committee for Children, Seattle, Washington—
www.cfchildren.org/index.cfm

And find online additional information about and support for developing children’s social-emotional skills:
The Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Networks, A Good Beginning: Sending America’s Children to School with the Social and Emotional Competence They Need to Succeed (2000), full report available through ERIC, ED 445810; report summary—
www.naeyc.org/ece/research/beginnings.asp
Ewing Marion Kaufmann Foundation, Set for Success: Building a Strong Foundation for School Readiness Based on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children (2002)—
Illinois Early Learning Project, Resources on Early Learning: Early Learning Web Links—
http://ecap.crc.uiuc.edu/cgi-bin/el/el/searchel.cgi
www.ericdigests.org/pre-9218/social.htm
Raver, C.C., Young Children’s Emotional Development and School Readiness (2003), Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (CEEP), Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative, EDO-PS-03-8—
http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eecearchive/digests/2003/raver03.html
Conclusion

Primary grade teachers continually develop school-wide efforts to intentionally help children acquire social-emotional skills. In addition, they use programs such as Responsive Classroom, Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum, and Interplay Solutions, which are often supported by careful research. The programs and the teacher efforts described here are examples of ways to incorporate social-emotional learning into the primary curriculum. Programs like these help teachers move away from a fragmented and often reactive approach to children’s social-emotional well-being to a proactive approach and a shared responsibility for children’s social-emotional health.

References

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. 2008. Kindergarten learning experiences. www.doe.mass.edu/ess/reports/0408k1e.doc

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