



Character Education and Social-Emotional Learning: Why We Must Teach the Whole Child

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“We have failed to educate the human heart.”
Clara Wachter Feldman,
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Introduction

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Character Education (CE) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) are two emerging educational strategies receiving well-deserved attention as our nation faces the challenge of educating students for the 21st century. Though these two fields emerged to a large extent independently, and each is distinct from the other, they share a fundamental belief: if we are to create safer schools, improve academic performance, and produce responsible and caring citizens, we must educate the whole child, head and heart (Character Education Partnership 2004; Elias 2003, p. 6).

Head and Heart

All educators have dealt with students who come to school without the understanding that a certain behavior is inappropriate or wrong, but for most students, this is not the case. Most who misbehave do so fully aware that their behavior is wrong. They know that being honest and respectful is the right thing to do (in their heads), but they haven't learned to care about these virtues (in their hearts). Feelings of inferiority, anger, and cynicism may stand in the way of caring about themselves or others (Weissbourd 2003).

Researchers now know that “in meaningful and sustained learning, the intellect and the emotion are inseparable. Brain research, for example, has demonstrated that . . . emotions [drive] attention, learning, memory and other important mental and intellectual activities” (McCombs 2001). Character educators and advocates for social and emotional learning understand that by addressing both the head and the heart, we help students to do their personal best so they will become responsible and caring citizens who contribute to the betterment of the world around them.

Everything Old Is New Again

Though CE and SEL are often perceived as new educational reforms, both of these strategies are in fact not new at all. Delivery methods may be new, but the concept of educating the heart as well as the head is rooted in the teachings of many ancient cultures (Elias 2003). Certainly the founders of our democracy knew that moral (character) education was essential to the viability of our democracy, which depends on knowledgeable and caring citizens (Lickona 1992). And Socrates himself wrote that the mission of education is to teach students to be both smart and good.

Today, we live in a complex society. Our knowledge base continues to expand at an unprecedented rate, and our educational systems are trying to keep up (Analytical Technologies 2004). But have we become too narrowly focused on academic achievement? Are we providing knowledge without the wisdom to guide it?

Why Our Students Need Character Education and Social-Emotional Learning

The Barrage of Negative Messages

Serious consideration of both CE and SEL becomes ever more important in today's rapidly changing world. Many parents and educators believe that escalating social problems are a direct result of the declining influence that families, schools, and faith organizations have in the moral development of our youth (Lickona 1992). There is also a growing concern about today's media-rich culture, which is constantly vying for the attention of our youth. The following is an excerpt from a PBS production of *Frontline* titled “Merchants of Cool” which aired in February 2001:



**“To educate a man in mind and not morals is to create a menace to society.”
Theodore Roosevelt**

Anywhere [young people] rest their eyes, they'll be exposed to a marketing message. A typical American teenager will process over 3,000 discrete advertisements in a single day, and 10 million by the time they're 18. Kids are also consuming massive quantities of entertainment media. Seventy-five percent of teens have a television in their room. A third have their own personal computer, where they spend an average of two hours a day online.

Messages from marketing and entertainment bombard young people with negative influences that can promote antisocial and insensitive behaviors, behaviors that students bring into the classroom (Lickona 1992). Many messages promote violence and drug use. Others encourage the sexualization of our youth well before they are psychologically equipped to understand sexual behavior (Kids Health 2004).

The Toll on Teachers

Our children don't leave these negative influences at the classroom door. Many bring the sarcastic (angry) humor of television comedians into the classroom dialogue, or mimic the disrespectful behaviors of sitcom characters. Some act out the violent behavior in video games or use the bad language they hear in popular music, while others exhibit inappropriate sexual behavior they see in movies and music videos.

Teachers must deal with the resulting misbehaviors while bearing the heavy burden of high-stakes testing, inadequate support and resources, and concerns about their ability to deal with problem students (Weissbourd 2003). All these stresses can then lead to disillusionment, a loss of the belief that teachers can make a difference. In an article published in *Educational Leadership*, Rick Weissbourd states that disillusionment is one of the biggest reasons that almost one-half of all U.S. teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching (Weissbourd 2003, Education Week 2001).

From the Students' Own Mouths

Young people themselves admit to a host of misbehaviors. A nationwide survey of 8,600 high school students showed that during the year prior to taking the survey

- 71% had cheated on an exam
- 92% had lied to their parents
- 40% of males and 30% of females had stolen something
- 16% were drunk at school
- 68% had hit someone because they were angry

(Josephson Institute 2000)

These high school students are just a few short years away from being fully enfranchised adults, our fellow citizens. Are these students on a path to become the “knowledgeable and caring citizens” required to sustain a democracy? Perhaps these statistics imply that students need more social, emotional, and moral education than what they are currently receiving. Educational strategies that meet this need are described below in detail.

What Is Character Education?

Defining CE

“To educate a man in mind and not morals is to create a menace to society.”

Theodore Roosevelt

Two of the most succinct and widely used definitions of character education come from leading authorities in the field. Thomas Lickona, the author of *Educating for Character*, defines character education as the “intentional and focused effort to help students understand, care about and act upon core ethical values.” Kevin Ryan, who, with Karen E. Bohlen, authored *Building Character in Schools: Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life*, defines character education as teaching students to “know the good, love the good, and do the good.”



Many ask the valid question, who decides what's "good"?

Core Values

Many ask the valid question, who decides what's "good"? Research done by the Institute for Global Ethics demonstrates that there are global understandings of what is considered good. These include virtues such as respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and compassion (Institute for Global Ethics 2004). Over the course of the past decade, communities around the nation have discovered that diverse groups of individuals with deep differences of opinion can reach a consensus on what values they wish to foster in their students. Communities can "join together around a commitment to our common ethical inheritance" (Character Education Partnership 2004).

CE as a Holistic Strategy

As Lickona's and Ryan's definitions state, CE is a holistic strategy taking a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral approach to a child's moral education. Effective CE teaches students to "know the good" by helping them develop an awareness of what it means to be responsible and caring human beings, and to "love the good" by helping them develop an internal motivation to then "do the good" by putting core ethical values into action. Each component is crucial. We've all known young people who know better than to act inappropriately but simply don't care, and most of us have known students who care but simply didn't know better. Then there are those who know what's right and who care but don't always know how to put their knowledge and concern into action.

Arguments for CE

In their book, Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlen, present the following arguments for character education. These arguments include those made by 1) intellectual authorities such as Aristotle and Socrates, who advocated attentiveness to the development of character; 2) our founding fathers who understood that

our democracy depends upon a moral citizenry and created public schools for an ostensibly moral purpose; 3) our legislators who in most states have mandated some form of civic or character education; 4) the American public, of which 90 percent believe that schools should teach character traits to students (Character Education Partnership 2004); and 5) the inevitability argument, which states that "the child is an ever-attentive witness" (Cole 1997) and that we are always and inevitably teaching values to our students

Effective CE

Effective character education moves well beyond the student. It involves the whole school staff, parents, caregivers, and community members. It provides opportunities for service learning and relationship building.

The Character Education Partnership has created a document titled "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education" (Character Education Partnership 2004) According to these principles, effective character education

1. **Promotes core ethical values.** Character education holds, as a starting philosophical principal, that there are widely shared, pivotally important core ethical values that form the basis of good character.
2. **Teaches students to understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values.** "Character" must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.
3. **Encompasses all aspects of the school culture.** Effective character education requires an intentional, proactive, and comprehensive approach that promotes the core values in all phases of school life.
4. **Fosters a caring school community.** The school itself must embody good character and progress toward becoming a microcosm of the civil, caring, and just society we seek to create as a nation.



“Children are not born with social skills; they must learn them.”

Charlotte Danielson, author, *Enhancing Student Achievement: A Framework for School Improvement*

5. **Offers opportunities for moral action.** In the ethical as in the intellectual domain, students are constructive learners; they learn best by doing. They need many and varied opportunities to apply core values in everyday applications and discussions.
6. **Supports academic achievement.** Character education and academic learning must not be conceived as separate spheres; rather there is a strong, mutually supportive relationship. Character education includes meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed.
7. **Develops intrinsic motivation.** Character education should strive to develop students’ intrinsic motivation. As they develop good character, they develop a stronger inner commitment to doing what their moral judgment tells them is right.
8. **Includes whole-staff involvement.** The school staff must become a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.
9. **Requires positive leadership of staff and students.** Character education requires moral leadership from both staff and students.
10. **Involves parents and community members.** The school must recruit parents and community members as full partners in the character-building effort.
11. **Assesses results and strives to improve.** Evaluation of character education should assess the character of the school, the school staff’s functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

What Is Social and Emotional Learning?

Defining SEL

“Children are not born with social skills; they must learn them.”

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Two leading organizations in the field of social and emotional learning offer the following definitions. The Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE) defines SEL this way: “Social and emotional education learns and teaches skills, knowledge and values that promote social and emotional development.” The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides this definition:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to knowledge, habits, skills, and ideals that are at the heart of a child's academic, personal, social, and civic development. They are necessary for success in both school and life. This type of learning enables individuals to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively.

Core SEL Competencies

In its *Safe and Sound* guide, CASEL defines these five core SEL competencies as

1. **Self-Awareness:** Recognizing feelings as they occur, having a realistic assessment of one’s own abilities and a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
2. **Social Awareness:** Sensing what others are feeling; being able to take their perspectives; appreciating and interacting positively with diverse groups.



Over 2,000
years ago,
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3. **Self-Management:** Handling emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks.
4. **Relationship Skills:** Handling emotions in relationships effectively; establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; negotiating solutions to conflict; seeking help when needed.
5. **Responsible Decision Making:** Accurately assessing risks; making decisions based on a consideration of all relevant factors and likely consequences of alternative courses of action; respecting others; taking personal responsibility for one’s decisions.

(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2004)

These competencies are integrated through a variety of curriculum-based programs such as those that center on social-skill development, conflict resolution, character education, or drug or violence prevention. Some schools also utilize assemblies, after-school programs, service-learning projects, and counseling sessions to foster these competencies, as well as classroom management techniques such as cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring (ECS 2003).

SEL as a Holistic Strategy

Over 2,000 years ago, Socrates offered these words of advice: “Know thyself.” Robin Stern of the Center for Social and Emotional Education at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, believes that the emerging SEL field is a formalization of Socrates’ philosophies and new understandings of the nature of biology, emotions, and intelligence (Stern 2003). Research now tells us that the neocortex (responsible for rational thought) and the limbic system (seat of emotion) are interconnected and function synergistically (Gewertz 2003). SEL addresses the whole

child by helping to remove the emotional and social barriers to learning (Ragozzino 2003).

Arguments for SEL

Numerous polls of parents and community leaders indicate a consensus in terms of what schools should be teaching our students. We clearly want our children to be literate, understand mathematics and science, be good problem-solvers, take responsibility for their personal well-being, develop positive relationships, be able to relate to those from different cultures and backgrounds, be caring and respectful, develop good character, and make sound moral decisions (Elias 2003). A growing body of evidence indicates that SEL fosters academic achievement and can help schools and districts reach academic goals (Committee for Children 2003; CASEL 2004).

Effective SEL

The social-emotional skills that students need for success are outlined in Maurice J. Elias’s booklet titled *Academic and Social-Emotional Learning*. They are:

1. **Learning requires caring.** Effective, lasting academic and social-emotional learning is built upon caring relationships and warm but challenging classroom and school environments.
2. **Teach everyday life-skills.** Life-skills that promote academic and social-emotional learning must be taught explicitly in every grade level.
3. **Link social-emotional instruction to other school services.** Application of social-emotional skills to everyday life is aided greatly by a consistent, developmentally appropriate structure of supportive services in school.
4. **Use goal-setting to focus on instruction.** Goal setting and problem-solving provide direction and energy for learning.
5. **Use varied instructional procedures.** Instruction for academic



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- and social-emotional learning should use varied modalities and approaches to reach the diverse styles and preferences of all learners.
6. **Promote community service to build empathy.** Community service plays an essential role in fostering generalization of social-emotional skills, particularly in building empathy.
 7. **Involve parents.** Involvement of parents in partnerships with the school to promote student's academic and social-emotional learning is likely to improve results.
 8. **Build social-emotional skills gradually and systematically.** Implementation of social-emotional learning into a school is an innovation that should be built on the existing strengths of the setting and occurs in stages over a period of several years.
 9. **Prepare and support staff well.** Effective academic and social-emotional instruction follows from well-planned professional development for all school personnel, and a system of support during the initial years of implementation.
 10. **Evaluate what you do.** Evaluation of efforts to promote social-emotional learning is an ethical responsibility that involves ongoing monitoring of the implementation, assessing outcomes, and understanding opinions and reactions of those who carry out and receive the efforts.

Complementary Strategies

CE and SEL are two complementary strategies with a great deal of overlap. Each fosters increased awareness, positive relationships, and ethical and caring behaviors. By providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to make smarter choices and the caring they need to develop morally, both character education and social-emotional learning help young people become the best they are capable

of becoming academically, emotionally, and socially.

What Are the Costs and Benefits of CE and SEL?

Costs

Implementation of any new strategy obviously requires study, planning, teamwork, leadership, and commitment.

Integrating, Not Adding On

CE and SEL are not simply “add-on” programs that contribute to the already heavy workload of educators. These strategies are intended to become a comprehensive and integral part of the school curriculum and climate, permeating all aspects of school life. Each strategy seeks to create a safer and more caring environment in which our students can get excited about the learning process and perform better academically.

Benefits

Academic Achievement

The academic curriculum is not sacrificed when schools promote CE or SEL. Rather, it benefits. The link between CE and SEL and improved academic performance seems to many educators a matter of common sense. How many teachers have been frustrated with, even saddened by, a student who is clearly bright enough to excel, but is not motivated, is unable to work collaboratively with others, and has no understanding of the rationale and benefits of responsible behavior?

However, in today's data-driven environment, common sense no longer serves as sufficient justification for integrating new processes into existing educational systems. Fortunately, there is a growing body of evidence to support the notion that when we approach our children's education from a more holistic



“Knowledge without wisdom is like a load of books on an ass’s back.”
Japanese proverb

perspective, we not only help them make wiser choices, but we foster higher academic achievement (CASEL 2004; CEP 2004).

Improved Behavior in School

Schools that embrace these two strategies are finding, among other things, improved academic performance with marked improvements in pro-social behaviors such as cooperation and respect (CEP, 2004; Ragozzino, 2003). Attendance also improves and dropout rates decline (Greenberg, 2003).

Retaining Our Teachers

It does not require a great leap in reasoning to conclude that when CE and SEL become part of the daily life of any school, the campus culture becomes a more rewarding work environment for teachers. Perhaps by embracing what CE and SEL have to offer, we could retain many of the brilliant and caring educators who choose to leave the profession each year because of disillusionment. When one compares the cost of implementing CE and SEL strategies with the tremendous cost of time, energy, talent, training, and revenue that is generated each time we lose a teacher, we must conclude that the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Improved Behavior Outside of School

Furthermore, the benefits will eventually reach well beyond the classroom. As Charlotte Danielson points out in an article published by the Committee for Children, “Business leaders report that they rarely fire employees for technical incompetence; much more frequently they let people go because they cannot get along with others.” Current events have taught us that when corporate leaders act without character and integrity, businesses and people suffer. That is why in today’s corporate environment, employers are paying much closer attention to the social skills and the

character of potential employees (Wagner 2003). Clearly, embracing CE and SEL strategies creates benefits not only for today’s children, but also for tomorrow’s workforce because the children of today will soon inherit the roles we adults now occupy.

Conclusion

“Knowledge without wisdom is like a load of books on an ass’s back.”

Japanese proverb

We can no longer afford to ignore the wisdom of intellectual authorities such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, nor the insights of our founding fathers. And we must begin to take a more serious look at the work of today’s great thinkers and the data that is emerging from their work. We need to look only a short distance to know why this is so crucial. As Maurice Elias, leader in the SEL field, recently stated:

We all know what smarts without social skills [character] looks like. It can look like individuals who are obsessed with their own success and status but are indifferent to the plight of others. It can look like youth who are unable to sustain employment because they can’t get along with their co-workers.... It can look like two honors students from Columbine High School who methodically murdered 12 fellow students and an instructor before killing themselves. (ECS 2003)

By opening our hearts and minds to the possibilities that CE and SEL offer, we may greatly reduce the likelihood of experiencing another tragic event such as Columbine. We may reduce the likelihood of another Enron or WorldCom. We know we will reduce student truancy and dropout rates, and perhaps future data will prove that we can reduce teacher dropout rates as well. CE and SEL give us the means to reach the goal of preparing a citizenry that is both smart and good.



About Leslie Matula, MindOH! Co-founder

Leslie brings a wealth of experience to the MindOH! team as a subject matter expert in the field of character education. As early as 1992, she created Project Wisdom, Inc., a leading producer of character education materials. The program has been implemented in more than 10,000 schools nationwide and reaches more than 4 million students each school day. Leslie leads the MindOH! Content Development Team for both product lines and speaks nationally on character education and discipline management issues and solutions. She received her Bachelor's in Liberal Studies from St. Edward's University.



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