

Implementing Social-Emotional Learning into a K-1 Classroom

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## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN K-1 CLASSROOM

### **Introduction**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) can be described as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2018). Throughout the past semester I have engaged and analyzed the concept of developing SEL skills with students in the classroom. Through evaluating research and evidence based SEL programs, to collaborating with colleagues about strategies that they have found successful, I have been able to view a variety of perspectives surrounding the idea of SEL. For the final project this term, I wanted to do something that will help me to engage and grapple with many of the ideas discussed this term in the course EPSE 585 and determine what SEL strategies work for me as an educator. To do this, I decided to choose some of the SEL promoting strategies we have discussed in class and implement them into my daily school routine for one month to see if I am noticing any positive changes with my students. Furthermore, to determine areas in which I can easily implement SEL without feeling the added pressure of doing “extra” work on top of my already busy schedule.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for doing this as my final project comes from a variety of perspectives. Firstly, every week during the EPSE 585 course I was being introduced to a new strategy or program that can help in developing SEL skills with students. I found myself reflecting on areas within my own teaching in which I may be lacking in supporting my students in terms of developing SEL skills. This could be for a variety of reasons, including the lack of discussing SEL in preservice teacher training I attended in Ontario. Although it can be found that

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most programs in British Columbia include a focus on SEL, I can say from first-hand experience it was not an explicit part of the program I attended (Hymel, Low, Starosta, Gill & Schonert-Reichl, 2018). I decided that I needed to start with putting SEL as a term focus for me in order to better support my students. With so many options being introduced in class, it would be difficult to try to do every single one within my class. I decided that the best way to see which ones work for me is to choose a few to implement first and see how I feel about these specifically.

Secondly and most importantly, I saw a major need for developing more SEL opportunities for the students within my class. I have quite a few students who are very egocentric and show little to no empathy towards others in the classroom. I have learned that this is a common theme that educators are noticing within their classrooms more frequently. Furthermore, I have a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who seems to only feel to the extremes of happy or mad. He has trouble identifying or labelling any of the other emotions he is feeling. I was also noticing this with other students in that they only seem to think that people are happy, mad or sad. I saw a need for more emotional vocabulary as well as discussions about feelings in general. I wanted how we feel and the concept of emotions as a whole to become a common conversation within the classroom community.

As “childhood is an important window for the promotion of mental well-being and the prevention of mental illness” (Hymel et al., 2018, p. 98), with schools being the main environment in which this learning takes place, there is a clear need for the promoting of positive social and emotional development (Hymel et al., 2018). Furthermore, being a K-1 teacher, I am educating youth who are new to the education system and are just learning important social and emotional skills in their life in general. It is crucial that I “give students the tools they need to interact with and meet the demands of social and instructional environment of the school”

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(Jones, Bailey, & Jacob, 2014, p.19) to be successful and confident learners throughout their educational careers. Therefore, one again establishing the need for these important conversations and opportunities to engage in SEL.

### **Strategies Used**

I decided that I wanted to implement opportunities for learning and exploring SEL that were embedded into the curriculum in which I had already planned and started carrying out. I did not want it to be a separate time of the day in which is labeled as “SEL time”. Through an Aboriginal perspective professional development workshop, I learned the importance of “circle time” and how this can play a key role in establishing a positive classroom environment. I decided that instead of having the usual calendar routine in the morning, I would change it to “morning check-in” which would involve the usual elements of our calendar routine but some additional time for connecting with each other. This begins with the entire class sitting in one large circle and carrying out a “check-in” routine. This check-in is a way for me to engage in some sort of activity in which we say good morning, greet each other warmly, discuss our current emotional state, and/or explore more deeply some different emotions. I have chosen different activities each morning to explore what did or did not work with my students in particular. I searched the internet to see what other K-1 teachers might be doing as their morning check-in as well as spoke to colleagues to gain some ideas. I tried a variety of ideas including:

- Watching different short films on YouTube looking at the concept of kindness, inclusivity and bullying and having discussions around these ideas.
- Morning greetings such as snowball greeting, fist pump hellos, rolling the ball to a friend and greeting them, finding the matching shoe and greeting them etc.
- Reading a variety of books about feelings, kindness, bullying, and friendship.

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- Using Kimochi's to prompt conversations about different emotions as well as label how we were feeling that morning.

The next strategy I decided to implement into my day was the idea of "Peace Time" after lunch. I was already carrying out a ten minute "quiet reading" period after lunch, but found that most students did not really use the time to practice their emergent reading skills and more so just chatted and remained in a hyper state from the lunch hour. I decided that "Peace Time" would include a mindfulness activity to begin and conclude with silent reading and would last twenty minutes instead of ten. This would allow the students to get their brain calm and focused for reading, as well as allow for them to focus without distraction from others and have more time to actually calm their bodies and their mind. I would like to continue "Peace Time" and eventually include the options of laying down and resting or drawing to provide students with the choices of ways to calm their bodies and minds.

I also incorporated some of the "MindUp" activities into the weekly schedule. I started with the first lesson and continued to lesson three. This involved discussing the parts of the brain, how they work and how we can use different strategies to calm our brains in different situations. I followed what was laid out in the book, as well as used some of the ideas and questions brought forth as journal writing prompts.

### **What I learned**

Even though I only implemented these strategies for a little over a month, I saw some major changes within the classroom community and my students. I found that many of my students were able to open up more during morning check-in as it persisted. I learned more about each of them and their home lives, as well as what they already knew about their emotions. I

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found that they were able to talk more deeply and actually understood more of their emotions than I had originally thought.

I also learned the importance of modelling in regards to setting expectations and providing guidelines for students, particularly in the morning check-in routine and mindfulness activities. When discussing new words and emotions that they did not know, it was so important to model how to talk about these as well as provide an accessible example for students in order to help them develop a true understanding of what that means in their context. For example, I used the Kimochi's to help students look at facial features by first analyzing what the face of the Kimochi looks like to them and what they think the feeling is. Even though some of the Kimochi's were big emotions and words they might not know such as optimistic or disappointed, they were able to look at the facial features and make connections with more accessible emotions familiar to them. When I modelled with examples of times I have felt these emotions, I found that the students were easily able to think of ideas in their own lives. This shows that even at a young age, students can develop and understand a large vocabulary of emotions. This is a crucial aspect in developing socially and emotional competent students.

In regards to modelling with mindfulness activities, I learned that my students needed guidance in order to carry out even something as simple as "natural breathing". I saw many students almost hyperventilating or very deep-breathing when we were carrying out mindfulness activities. There was also a lot of moving around, opening their eyes or being concerned with others while carrying out the activity. Through continued modelling and discussions, as well as connecting to some of the MindUp lessons we had done, students are slowly learning how to be more mindful and how it can be beneficial to them being successful throughout the school day.

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### **Conclusion**

“Social and emotional skills are the foundation for children’s positive behavior in schools” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 20) by teaching them about focusing, listening attentively, following direction, managing emotions, dealing with conflicts and working cooperatively with peers (Jones et al., 2014). All of these skills are crucial in developing the core competencies as listed in the British Columbia curriculum and therefore need to be taught throughout the school year. I found that through the implementation of these programs I was able to better support my students in engaging in developing SEL skills. Furthermore, I was also able to work on developing my own SEL as an educator. As a new teacher, I am still trying to decipher what strategies work best for me and how I organize my classroom. Through trying these different programs, I was able to explore more deeply where I stand with SEL and where I can take the learning opportunities with my students. I will continue to engage in SEL and implement some of these strategies I did over the past month, as well as continue to explore and test more strategies to engage my students more deeply in developing skills related to SEL.

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### References

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