

Making the Case for SEL, CE, or SECD:

The Effects of Social-Emotional and Character Development in the World Around Us

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Character education has been a staple in student social development in schools for more than a century. As far back as the 1800s, McGuffey Readers used stories to teach morals and values to students (Kato, 2016). However, the focus on character education has both declined and intensified over the years depending on the state and needs of society. In 1992, a resurgence of the importance of character education emerged from the Aspen Declaration on Character Education (Likona, 1993), resulting in character education being used in many schools to teach the values of respect, justice, citizenship, and responsibility (K-64, 2016). To better meet the needs of character education in schools, programs such as the Character Counts program modified these values to include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Great Schools Staff, 2013).

Meanwhile, social-emotional learning (SEL), which compliments and somewhat parallels the concepts of character education, has surfaced in schools over the past few decades. The term “social-emotional learning” originated from a 1994 meeting held by the Fetzer Institute to address ineffective school programming for students’ emotional needs (CASEL). Since then, a growing number of teachers are using SEL in their classrooms. The Collaborative for Academics, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the leading institute for the support of SEL in schools. It names the five core SEL competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making.

However, both social-emotional learning programs and character education programs used in schools have some gaps in instruction. While most teachers teach character education through constructed programs, these programs do not necessarily allow for true knowledge transfer to real-life situations. Liu (2014) suggested that teachers should not

separate character instruction from general instruction due to students' inability to transfer knowledge from a specialized program to actual situations. Additionally, Davis (2003) found that many character education programs lacked teaching the students to do the right things for the right reasons. Likewise, SEL has some weaknesses. In research by Zakrzewski (2016), students' use of SEL skills in any given situation was dependent upon their values and beliefs. Students reacted to real-life scenarios in varied ways depending on their values (learned behaviors, home environment, responses modeled outside of school by adults and children) even though they had the same social-emotional instruction in schools. Character education can fill the gaps of SEL; likewise, SEL can fill the gaps of character education. Each can benefit the other. When melded together, in a term coined "Social-Emotional and Character Development" (SECD), SEL and character education provide a solid underlayment for students in developing life-values *and* methods to apply these values to life situations.

SECD provides students with two distinct learning paths: (1) the knowledge of life values or traits and (2) avenues for displaying these traits in life situations. While there is much research on the benefits of teaching character education values to children while they are in school, it is just as crucial for children to apply and carry the lessons, learned through SEL, to other areas of their lives. Even more importantly, however, is how SECD fulfills needs and benefits in the world around us. What are the effects of teaching SECD to children on (1) classmates and friends, (2) family members, (3) employers and co-workers, and (4) communities, societies, nations, and the world? This article explores the needs of multiple groups in society (Group Need) and how SECD helps students become assets and yield benefits to these groups by considering both the values that they learn, which align with character education (CE Values),

and the avenues children have for displaying these traits as found in SEL instruction (SEL Application).

Classmates and Friends

Group Need: Peer relationships largely dictate children's school experiences (Greater Good in Education, 2019). Peers need to know that their classmates value them. Students' classmates need to feel that they are in a safe, caring environment. While no situation is free of conflict, these classmates should know that they can come to school, interact with others in a way that they don't feel threatened, and learn in a situation where all share respect. Teaching students SECD in schools allows them to gain knowledge of the values needed to be a positive peer, while at the same time, giving them the skills to make friends and interact favorably.

CE Values: The character education portion of SECD teaches students to value other people (Teachnology, n. d.). Through character education, students learn the value of friendship through trustworthiness, respect, fairness, and caring (Good Character, 2021).

SEL Application: Research shows that students with SEL skills, such as social awareness and relationship skills, get along better with others (Options for Youth, 2021). Through SEL, children learn how to make friends and build positive, healthy, lifelong relationships. A good friend or classmate demonstrates value by treating peers well and speaking kindly to them. SEL teaches students to have positive attitudes about their peers and to see situations from different perspectives. Classmates learn the value of giving and receiving compliments, how to handle conflict in beneficial ways, and how to make fair decisions. These students learn to cooperate with others and practice empathy. They learn to manage their emotions, which results in fewer classroom interruptions, thereby making a more stable learning environment for their classmates (Everyday Speech, 2020).

Families

Group Need: Families have similar needs as classmates and friends. Family members need to feel loved, valued, and safe. These needs are complicated, though, because many of today's families need to develop SECD tools just as students need to develop these tools. While parents are key to helping their children learn and build SEL skills, parents can also learn skills simply by helping reinforce what their children learn about SEL at school (Everyday Speech, 2020). Ball (2017) found that it may be necessary for school staff to take on the role of teaching parents values, and concurrently, instruct the parents in how to apply these values to their lives and how to pass these values on to their children (Ball, 2017).

CE Values: Just as with classmates and friends, character education, in the context of families, focuses on the value of people through trustworthiness, respect, fairness, and caring.

SEL Application: By learning SEL skills such as social awareness and relationship skills, families will have a happier and healthier home life (Move this World, 2020). Additionally, Options for Youth (2021) found that the value of self-awareness is crucial for children to have positive relationships with family. Through self-awareness, family members learn to identify and manage their own thoughts and feelings, improving interactions with each other. Family members need to learn to communicate effectively, build relationships, and negotiate fairly (Kansas State Department of Education, n. d.). When family members are engaged with each other, this improves the overall attitudes and behaviors in the family (Move this World, 2020).

Employers and Co-Workers

Group Need: Most employers find that employees' abilities to handle emotions and function socially are essential workplace skills (Cagemini Research Institute, 2021). Employers

need employees who have people skills and can solve problems. Over half of business leaders in the US have difficulty finding workers with problem-solving skills (Committee for Children, 2016). Likewise, co-workers need to work with people who are dependable and are agreeable. Through SECD in school, students will learn the values and social skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

CE Values: How a worker performs a job as an adult is affected by childhood character development. It benefits children to learn and internalize strong values (K-64, 2016). The character education values that will lead children to become strong employees include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, and fairness.

SEL Application: The SEL competencies that will lead students to become good employees include Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. Being a responsible worker requires having both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Employees need to have effective communication, work as team members, and make logical and beneficial decisions (Committee for Children, 2016). These soft skills, which are developed through SEL programs, are vital for people to excel in the workplace (K-64, 2016).

Society: Communities, Nations, and the World

Group Need: Society needs members who strive to be productive citizens. People in society need to know that others are going to live in respectable ways, free from risk behaviors that would contradict most communities' values (Jones et al., 2015). A lack of social and emotional learning is recognized as a principal factor in risk behaviors that cause multiple public health problems such as addiction, obesity, and violence (Committee for Children, 2016). The Committee for Children (2016) found that Kindergarteners trained in SECD are more likely to be

productive members of society by holding stable employment with less possibility of needing public assistance, having addiction problems, or committing crimes. In addition, members of society need to be wise stewards of society's funding. By providing funds to teach SECD skills to children in schools and thereby improving public health, fewer funds will need to be spent on addressing problems such as addiction and poverty once children reach adulthood (Jones, 2016). Society also needs members who support civic programs to improve living conditions for people who are less fortunate. For example, teaching SECD concepts in schools helps students escape the cycle of poverty (AEI/Brookings, 2015).

CE Values: Character values that create justice, freedom, and a sense of community include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Mercer, 2019). These character education values allow for societies that function properly and are key to the success of democracy through teaching students to respect the rights of others, perform civic duties, comply with laws, and have concern for others (Singh, 2019).

SEL Application: The SEL Competencies that promote positive societal behavior include Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. Two main applications of SEL skills include respect for self and respect for others. By respecting one's self, a person will choose not to engage in risk behaviors; rather, a person will engage in personal improvement behaviors. By respecting others, people value others' opinions, work with them cooperatively, and provide supports where needed. These skills can be gained from experiences such as those found in after-school programs where students experience cooperation, empathy, and decision-making as they interact with students in a community-like setting (Everyday Speech, 2020).

Conclusion

Through the combination of character education (teaching students the head knowledge of values or morals) and SEL (teaching students how to apply values to situations to make positive choices), SECD provides what students need to be productive and healthy members of classrooms, families, workplaces, and the world. Students learn knowledge and skills that fulfill needs and benefit society, making students assets to those with whom they interact. By taking the time to instill values *and* teach application skills to children through SECD, teachers improve the personal interactions of individuals around the world and provide a more positive living experience daily thus increasing the quality of life spanning in scale from households, work environments, local, regional, national, and internationally.

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