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Should Social-emotional Learning be Embedded in the Elementary School Curriculum?

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The need to educate the whole child necessitates that Social-emotional learning (SEL) be embedded in the elementary school curriculum (Kasper & Massey, 2002). Social-emotional learning is the development of knowledge, values, attitudes, and mindsets that produce positive outcomes in children both in and out of school (Steed et al., 2021). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) continues to employ scholars and experts to figure out ways of structuring the SEL curriculum such that it helps children to be competent in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020; Steed et al., 2021). Integrating these skills into the curriculum prepares children for the attainment of life goals.

There is a growing concern among stakeholders in the education sector about the need for SEL content which helps children to control impulses, regulate their emotions, and achieve both long-term and short-term goals. SEL is perceived as an important element of the school curriculum (Frye et al., 2022). As significant as educating the whole child is, not all curriculum ideologists or theorists perceive it as so. This paper aims to identify the lens through which six curriculum ideologies view SEL, and how important educating the total child is to each of them.

In this essay, SEL is viewed from six lenses: humanist, social efficiency, developmental, social reconstructionist, Noddings' ethics of care, and curriculum standardization ideologies. Humanist theorists believe that "subject matter" is most important when planning the curriculum because they perceive it as the core of academic disciplines (Schiro, 2013). Social Efficiency places value on the programmed curriculum; this allows learning content to be sequentially organized according to the behavior that is expected to accompany learning. Developmentalists prioritize the needs of the child over the curriculum; the interest of the child is important in

planning the content of learning. Social Reconstructionist ideologists view curriculum from a social perspective; the curriculum is planned based on the needs of the child and the ability to identify and solve real-world problems in society. Thornton (2001) explores Noddings' thoughts on the need to care for children to make them competent in and out of school. Lastly, Sparapani and Perez (2015) examine some of the pushbacks with standardized curricula and how to address them using differentiated instruction.

Overall, each of the six ideologies values different forms of knowledge and would perceive the integration of SEL content into the elementary school curriculum differently. The lens through which they view the integration will be outlined succinctly in the following sections.

Humanist Curriculum Ideology

Humanist curriculum Ideology posits that subjects of study are the core academic disciplines, and the curriculum is planned around these subjects. The ideology emphasizes pushing the knowledge of disciplines forward (Kliebard, 2014; Schiro, 2013). Humanist curriculum ideologists believe in the loose connection between the world of intellect, the world of knowledge, and the academic disciplines. For example, a biologist will do what biologists do like taking samples, examining cells, using the language of a biologist, etc. That is, the content of the subjects of study in academic disciplines is designed to nurture the mind to be intelligent in the field or discipline (Schiro, 2013).

Humanist theorists prioritize knowledge of the curriculum over the child's interests and needs. This is because "humanist curriculum ideologists are less concerned about the child than the curriculum" (Schiro, 2013, p.47) and may not perceive SEL as an essential part of the school curriculum. Historically, the recommendations of the committees of ten and fifteen (Kliebard,

2004), the great books (Adler, 1982), and modern curriculum resources like the “new math” and MACOS emphasize the development of the mind through the content of books or disciplines (Bruner, 1966; Schiro, 2013). That is, the curriculum is structured to train the mind; the mind is believed to be a muscle that can be trained through mental exercises (Kliebard, 2004). However, elementary schools like Meadowfield that are Paideia accredited and certified may value SEL for critical and creative thinking because two of Paideia’s guiding principles of the schools’ operations are “to be a good citizen of the nation and the world, and to make a good life for oneself” (Meadowfield Elementary School, n.d.). Specifically, children are taught via seminars through which they build social and interpersonal skills, project-based activities, and student-led conferences which culminate in active learner engagement and participation. Although the school’s curriculum content seems to exemplify humanist ideology, certain social-emotional skills seem embedded in school activities.

Generally, Humanists do not value the interest of the individual child or consider what makes the child happy, rather, humanist theorists propose a universal education for all children based on their age, and the curriculum is planned around what academic scholars think is important (Adler, 1982). In sum, humanist theorists prioritize the content knowledge of disciplines and the potential to help develop the intellectual capabilities of individuals over nurturing the whole child even though the paideia schools may value SEL because of their curriculum content which encourages active learner engagement.

Social Efficiency Ideology

Social efficiency (SE) ideology posits that a curriculum is designed to help children grow into responsible adults and become functional members of society (Schiro, 2013). According to social efficiency theorists, knowledge is viewed from either a subjective or objective stance, but

objectivity is believed to be more important (Schiro, 2013). Children are educated to acquire skills and vocations that help them perform specific activities (Bobbit, 1918; Tyler, 1949) that are useful for society, thus living responsibly (Schiro, 2013). The overarching constructs of SE ideology are social control (Kliebard, 2004) and efficiency (Shiro, 2013). Social control explains society's efforts to make people conform to certain norms, behavioral patterns, and characters that are acceptable in society through education. Efficiency requires that the curriculum is structured in behavioral terms (Schiro, 2013).

SE educators may or may not value SEL; the perception of SEL might vary with theorists or professions. For example, Tyler might view SEL as important because he believes that learners' experiences, interests, and needs should determine how objectives are stated (Tyler, 1949). While most SE theorists may not value SEL because the underlying paradigms of SE are behaviorism, positivism, and neoliberalism (Schiro, 2013; Stone, 2020). That is, non-academic content like SEL may not be of value to them because it cannot be measured objectively.

However, Bobbit might recommend SEL to be taught to students seeking careers in communications or human services such as nurses, tour guides, physicians, and other professionals. SEL might not be necessary for an HVAC technician or a bricklayer whose skills can only be measured in behavioral terms (Bobbit, 1918; Kliebard, 2004). Worthy of note is that SE's two aims are to ensure society's proper functioning and prepare individuals to live meaningful lives in society (Shiro, 2013). I wonder if the latter aim can be attained without SEL since the overall aim of SEL is to prepare children for the attainment of life goals (CASEL, 2020). Today, with standardization and emphasis on high-stakes testing in elementary schools SE theorists may push back on integrating SEL content with the academic curriculum but rather

focus on the knowledge of academic and vocational skills that can be measured objectively. Overall, the perception of SEL by SE theorists may depend on the context, profession, or individual theorist.

Developmentalist curriculum ideology

Developmentalist ideology posits that knowledge emanates from personal meaning-making (Schiro, 2013). The curriculum planning is centered around the interests and needs of the individual child. Developmentalist ideologists believe that knowledge originates in subjective reality. The underpinning paradigm of this type of knowledge is constructivism. This is the ability to internalize knowledge and create meaning based on one's experiences and personal interpretations (Schiro, 2013).

Developmentalist theorists emphasize nurturing the whole child (Kliebard, 2004; Schiro, 2013). Developmentalist ideology provided a research-based context for the implementation of SEL in schools (McCombs, 2004, as cited in Sugishita, 2019). Similarly, several developmentalist constructs are found in the SEL program outline such as responsive classrooms, caring learning community, and democratic classrooms (Yoder, 2014). Responsive classrooms exemplify learner-engaging content and experiential knowledge (Dewey, 1929; Montessori, 1912). A caring community values moral excellence, showing concern and compassion for others (McCombs, 2004, as cited in Sugishita, 2019). The features of democratic classrooms are participatory decision-making, cooperative rulemaking, and freedom to make choices that are not harmful to another person. For example, in Summer Hill schools, learners are allowed to participate in the curriculum planning and decision-making process, their needs and interests are at the center of curriculum planning and implementation (A.S. Neill Summerhill School, n.d.; Yoder, 2014). In sum, SEL content would thrive in developmentalist elementary

schools and would be appreciated by teachers, students, and stakeholders in education because of its capacity to help nurture the whole child in a learner-centered context.

Social Reconstruction Ideology

Social Reconstruction (SR) theorists see knowledge through the social lens. They believe that society is encumbered with many problems and the school can solve these problems via the curriculum (Kliebard, 2014; Schiro, 2013). That is, society suffers from certain ills like injustice, inequality, poverty, etc., and society needs a complete reconstruction and regeneration through the knowledge that people receive from being educated (Counts, 1932; Green 1971; Schiro, 2013). Thus, the whole child needs to be nurtured for innovation, problem-solving, and critical thinking to be empowered to fight the status quo (Counts, 1932; Friere, 1970; Schiro, 2013).

The integration of SEL into the elementary school curriculum would help achieve social reform through a well-rounded education that empowers learners to be balanced in all facets of life and make decisions that would help transform society. During the great depression, at the Highlander Folk School (Phenix & Selver, 1985; Schiro, 2013), the school workshop had people talking about what they needed to have done in the community leveraging what they have learned. Through the Pilot Project Citizen, people became aware of the power within them that they could use to transform society (Phenix & Selver, 1985). Adults were taught how to read and write to pass voter registration requirements; learners didn't only learn to internalize knowledge, whatever was learned was used for the good of society (Phenix & Selver, 1985; Schiro, 2013). In addition, students did not only think of making change happen, their words, actions, and songs emphasized the need for change (Freire, 1970; Phenix & Selver, 1985). Similarly, Greene (1971) emphasizes the need for self-consciousness and reflexiveness on the part of individuals for self-awareness which will bring about curiosity and the will to effect change in the society. Thus, the

process of empowering people for self-awareness and creative thinking necessitates SEL (CASEL, 2020).

Noddings: Caring and Competence

Stephen Thornton presents Noddings' thoughts on what the goal of education should be, which is caring and competence (Thornton, 2001). He states how Noddings would address the two questions that are important to curriculum theory and practice which are: "where should the curriculum maker begin and how would Noddings reconstitute the curriculum?" (Thornton, 2001, p. 3). The former question addresses the phase of curriculum planning that's more important. The preactive view is a phase of pre planning the curriculum and determining what should be taught while the interactive view is the actual implementation phase. Noddings, according to Thornton (2001), prioritizes the interactive view of curriculum planning over the preactive view. Noddings contends that the bedrock for standardization and high-stakes testing is deciding what to be taught in advance of classroom activities and should not be prioritized.

Noddings thinks that learning should flow naturally, and learning content should not be too structured but should flexibly happen as an interaction between the teacher and the learner. This leads to an interactive view of the curriculum. Noddings asserts that learners' interests, needs and happiness should determine what the content of the curriculum should be. In addition, the school should be a place for interaction and connection between the teacher and the learner; this helps the teacher build a long-lasting relationship with the child. Thus, a child who is nurtured and cared for would acquire cognitive and moral competence. The latter question examines how Noddings would plan the curriculum. Thornton (2001) states that Noddings would consider the needs, interests, and happiness of learners in deciding the curriculum content. This consideration

would require a good teacher-learner relationship which would help the teacher know what individual learner needs to be taught.

In the context of Noddings' ethic of care, SEL would be valued. The whole child is nurtured through care, and this results in competence not just in academics but in all aspects of life. Similarly, SEL is believed to help complete the development of children (Ahmed et al., 2020) and for learning life skills like sympathy, empathy, caring for others, emotional skills, goal setting, and intellectual capability (CASEL, 2020). Non-academic content like homemaking, moral excellence, social skills, and control of impulses are required to empower the whole child for meaningful living in society.

Sparapani and Perez on Standardized Curriculum

Sparapani and Perez present the solution to curriculum standardization which is differentiated instruction and how "curriculum decisions affect the teachers who teach the curriculum and the students who experience the curriculum by understanding the relationship between curriculum, educators, and students through the interactions occurring within the environment in which those interactions occur" (Sparapani & Perez, 2015, p. 78). The salient feature of Curriculum standardization is uniformity in what children learn irrespective of their needs and interests. The challenge with standardization of the curriculum is making children learn the same content without considering what they are interested in or what they need (Sparapani & Perez, 2015). The authors present the remedy for some of the issues that arise with standardization which is differentiated instruction.

The school is a social environment (Vygotsky, 1978) where students learn the content that is presented by the educator who should understand where the learner is coming from in terms of belief, historical background (social, emotional, economic, religious, cultural, etc.) and

know what suits the need and interest of learners (Durlack et al., 2011; Sparapani & Perez, 2015). Although teachers may not be directly involved in curriculum planning, the curriculum serves as a guide (Fryshman, 2008, as cited in Sparapani & Perez, 2015) that can be flexibly maneuvered via differentiated instruction. Through differentiated instruction “all students are regularly offered choices, and students are matched as closely as possible with tasks compatible with their interests as learners (Sparapani & Perez, 2015, p.84). Similarly, SEL teaches children problem-solving skills like identifying problems, generating alternatives, and choosing the best solution out of a wide range of alternatives; it improves the teacher-learner relationships and helps the teacher maintain classroom management and discipline (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

Ultimately, SEL can be embedded with the school curriculum and implemented with differentiated instruction; this enables all learners to learn academic and non-academic content that suits their needs. Thus, the teacher is empowered to surmount challenges with implementing a scripted or standardized curriculum.

Conclusions

CASEL defines SEL by outlining the five intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive skills which are reflective of the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal domains of SEL (CASEL, 2013; Oberle et al., 2016). Elementary schools are the right places to provide children with the basic knowledge of SEL for competence in attitudes and behaviors (Greenberg, 2010).

Nel Noddings emphasizes the need to show care for children which results in competence (Thornton, 2015). She contends that learners should not be coerced or forced to learn the same content but what makes the learner happy in an actively engaging classroom context (Noddings, 2003). Furthermore, she emphasizes the continuity of the teacher-student relationship for sustained interaction and effective communication in the classroom (Thornton, 2015).

Sparapani and Perez outline the need to know the learner for flexible alignment of what is taught to the interest of the learner; the overarching construct for this thought is differentiated instruction. That is, the teacher flexibly allows each child to choose learning constructs in a guided manner. This erodes the rigidity that comes with the standardization of curriculum (Sparapani & Perez, 2015). These thoughts outline the need for creativity in deciding what is taught to individual learners and the need to embed SEL in elementary school curricula. Ahmed et al. (2020) state that:

Emotional competency plays a vital role for school children in various ways. For instance, it ensures all children get the opportunity to learn the essential skills necessary for future success. Additionally, exposing students to social and emotional skills helps to improve students' competencies, behavior, and attitude toward school and learning improved. (p. 667)

This assertion implies that learners need SEL skills to live responsibly in society. In the 21st century and with the effect of Covid 19 virus, humanist, social efficiency, developmentalist, and social reconstructionist curriculum ideologists need to propagate the need to integrate SEL with the school curriculum in elementary schools for a balanced living and nurturing of the whole child.

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