

# **Cultivating the Social, Emotional and Inner Lives of Children and Teachers**

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As adults, we often feel the pressures of today's fast-paced world and think back longingly to a time when our daily lives were a lot less stressful. Today one third of Americans report that they are living with "extreme stress" and almost half feel that the stress in their lives has increased over the past five years (American Psychological Association 2007). Unfortunately, today's children are not immune to the stress of everyday life, either. Our society has changed in many ways that increase pressure on children and compromise their childhoods.

A poll conducted by the National Kids Poll surveyed 875 children, ages nine through thirteen, about what caused them stress and what coping strategies they used the most to deal with the stress in their lives. The top three sources of stress that they reported were grades, school, and homework (36%); family (32%); and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21%). The top three coping strategies were to play or do something active (52%), to listen to music (44%); and to watch TV or play a video game (42%). Of the ten coping strategies that were chosen the most, not one involved going within and being able to calm oneself (Lyness 2005).

While we, as adults, must work to reduce the sources of excessive childhood stress, we must also provide children with a wider range of skills for coping with it. Fortunately, many teachers all over the world are doing just that. They are teaching

young people how to regulate their emotions by helping them to focus their attention inward and this is helping young people better manage the stresses that come their way.

A few months ago I witnessed this firsthand in a first grade classroom in a public school in East Harlem, NYC. This particular classroom had lots of Special Education students who were very hyperactive. Their teacher, Tom Roepke, was getting them ready to listen to a specific CD – something they were very used to doing. The students quieted down and became still and the CD started. The man’s voice told them to listen to some sounds. The voice reminded them not to name out loud the sound they heard, but just say to themselves what they thought the sound was. As they listened to the instructions, they began to listen with their whole bodies; for example, when they heard the sound of a bird, they moved their arms like a bird. They managed to not speak and stayed calm and focused for a full six minutes. The voice on the CD was that of Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). The words, however, were mine from my book *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children* (Lantieri 2008) which accompanies the CD that was being used.

Tom is one of many teachers who are part of The Inner Resilience Program, a nonprofit organization which I co-founded soon after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Since then, we have been training teachers who, in turn, are teaching thousands of students how to strengthen the neural pathways that help children pay attention and manage impulsivity through what are called “contemplative educational practices”. These classroom practices are simply opportunities for both children and adults to experience silence and focused attention by being present in the moment to what they are experiencing within and without.

## **Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning**

A growing body of research suggests that helping children develop good social and emotional skills early in life makes a big difference in their long-term health and well-being. In his ground-breaking book *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman identified EQ - emotional intelligence - as being as important as IQ in terms of children's healthy development and future life success(1998, 19). He writes:

Given how much emphasis schools and admissions tests put on it, IQ alone explains surprisingly little of achievement in work or life. When IQ test scores are correlated with how well people perform in their careers, the highest estimate of how much difference IQ accounts for is about 25 percent (Hunter & Schmidt 1984; Schmidt & Hunter 1981). A careful analysis, though, suggests a more accurate figure may be no higher than 10 percent, and perhaps as low as 4 percent. (Sternberg 1996)

Goleman's work has helped us understand the importance of emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective use of one's IQ; that is, one's cognitive skills and knowledge. He made the connection between our feelings and our thinking more explicit by pointing out how the brain's emotional and executive areas are interconnected physiologically, especially as these areas relate to teaching and learning.

Brain science tells us that a child's brain goes through major growth that does not end until the mid-twenties. Neuroplasticity, as scientists call it, means that the sculpting of the brain's circuitry during this period of growth depends to a great degree on a child's daily experiences. Environmental influences on brain development are

particularly powerful in shaping a child's social and emotional neural circuits. Young people who learn how to calm down when they are upset, for instance, seem to develop greater strength in the brain's circuits for managing distress (Goleman 2008).

Many of the skills defined as essential for effectiveness in the modern workplace—for example, the ability to function as part of a team, work with diverse colleagues and customers, analyze and generate solutions to problems, and persist in the face of challenging setbacks – are social and emotional competencies.

As a result, a strong public demand is arising throughout the world today for schools to implement effective educational approaches that promote not only academic success but also enhance health, prevent problem behaviors, and prepare young people better for the world of work and engagement as world citizens. In the United States, a 2007 poll of registered voters released by the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills reported that 66% believed students need a broader range of skills than just the basics of reading, writing and math. Eighty percent said the skills that students need today to be prepared for the jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are very different from what was needed 20 years ago.

Often called the “missing piece” in school improvement efforts, the field of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) reflects the growing recognition that healthy social and emotional development advances children's success in school and life. SEL is informed by scholarly research demonstrating that all children can have a school experience that helps them to be not just academically competent but supports them in being engaged life-long learners who are self-aware, caring and connected to others, and active contributors to a more just, peaceful, productive and sustainable world.

SEL is the process by which children and even adults develop fundamental skills for success in school and life. SEL teaches the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically. The field of SEL builds from work in child development, classroom management, prevention of problem behavior, and new knowledge about the role of the brain in social and cognitive growth. Most SEL programming in schools focuses on five core groups of social and emotional competencies.

- Self-awareness – accurately assessing one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
- Self-management – regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately.
- Social awareness – being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognizing and using family, school and community resources.
- Relationship skills – establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed.
- Responsible decision-making – making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community. (O’Brien, Resnik, 2009)

There are two primary approaches to promoting social and emotional competency in a school environment. The first is skill development, which requires explicit social and emotional skills instruction provided in a systematic and sequenced way in the classrooms spanning all grade levels. This approach is most effective when

an evidence-based SEL program is implemented that provides children with the opportunity to be actively involved in their learning, with adequate time for practice, reflection and reinforcement of specific social and emotional competencies.

The second approach focuses on creating effective learning environments that are safe, respectful, caring and well-managed. A learning environment that cultivates SEL is characterized by supportive relationships, both student-to-student and also student-to-teacher, with relevant and challenging instructional practices and curriculum. For many educators involved in bringing SEL into schools, this second approach is about changing and managing school environments or climates – in the classrooms, in the hallways, on the playing fields, in clubs, and among all school staff. It is also about developing skills and the conditions that maximize young people’s potential for optimal performance, caring human connection, and relationship effectiveness.

The magnitude of impact and the strength of the research base behind SEL are significant. As a point of comparison, studies of the impacts of reducing class-size show smaller academic gains as a result than does SEL instruction. In challenging economic times, when cost cuts may require painful teacher layoffs, the payoff of investing in children’s social and emotional development, are real and sizable. For example, one major multi-year study found that by the time they were adults, students who received Social and Emotional Learning in grades 1-6 had an 11 percent higher grade-point average and significantly greater levels of school commitment, attachment and completion at age 18. The same research showed that the rate of students required to repeat a grade who received Social and Emotional Learning in grades 1-6 was 14 percent, versus 23 percent of students in a control group. At age 18, students in the

same study showed a 30 percent lower incidence of school behavior problems, a 20 percent lower rate of violent delinquency, and a 40 percent lower rate of heavy alcohol use. Clearly, the decision-making and self-mastery skills these students learned early in life paid off greatly as they grew older and encountered life's increasingly complex and challenging choices. The academic and life-success returns on investments in SEL are substantial (Durlak, Weissberg et. al. 2011).

### **The Added Dimension of Contemplative Practice**

At the cutting edge of the field of SEL is an emerging focus that takes the skills of social and emotional learning and moves them into a deeper dimension. By integrating the skills of social and emotional learning with contemplative educational experiences, SEL competencies such as self-awareness take on a new depth of inner exploration, managing emotions becomes self-discipline; empathy becomes a basis for altruism, caring and compassion. Building on the acknowledgement that the field of education must not only pay attention to the inner lives of teachers and students but also give them pedagogical tools designed to cultivate skills that foster inner calm and resilience, an integration of SEL with contemplative teaching and learning is becoming an important part of some schools and classrooms. Such practices may be designed to cultivate the potential of mindful awareness, in an ethical-relational context in which the values of personal growth, learning, moral living and caring for others are also nurtured (Roesner, Peck 2006).

In many classrooms in the United States and elsewhere, teachers are beginning to take the time to cultivate a contemplative practice themselves by regularly taking time to go inward in purposeful ways that nurture their inner lives. So before we begin

to teach young people to calm down and relax, we have to set aside some time to regularly practice a contemplative practice ourselves first. Daniel Goleman's CD, *The Art of Meditation* (2001) is an excellent resource for beginners and more experienced practitioners alike. It provides four different reflective exercises to choose from.

From this place of having taken time to go inward ourselves, we can then begin to equip young people with the skills to more effectively be both aware of and regulate their emotions. We are finding out that the regular practice of these skills strengthens the brain circuits that underlie emotional regulation. Given the busy, sometimes frenzied nature of our lives, reflective moments are often missing. The more children can begin to experience quiet and stillness, the more they can feel an inner balance and sense of purpose which can offset the overstimulation that is so abundant in most of our lives (Lantieri 2008, 10). The benefits of such a regular practice can include:

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- Improved concentration
- The ability to deal with stressful situations more effectively by creating a more relaxed way of responding to stressors
- Greater control over one's thoughts, with less domination by unwelcome thoughts
- Greater opportunity for deeper communication and understanding between adults and children, because thoughts and feelings are being shared on a regular basis

We, as the adults in children’s lives, cannot keep telling our children countless times to “calm down” or “pay attention” without providing them with some practical guidelines for how to do so. By offering children systematic lessons in contemplative techniques, we can help them cultivate their budding capacities and facilitate the development of their neural pathways. Through our work and current research, we are finding out that teaching these practices to students is increasing not only their social and emotional skills, but their resilience as well: the capacity to not only cope, but thrive in the face of adversity.

In spring 2006, The Inner Resilience Program received generous funding to conduct rigorous research to determine the efficacy of the work by using a randomized control trial to examine the impact of the program on the well-being of teachers and students as well as on the climate of their classrooms. A total of 57 teachers of Grades 3–5 (including 855 students) from NYC public schools participated in the study. The teachers were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. Teachers in the treatment group participated in the IRP during the 2007–2008 school year. Activities, which were intended to reduce teacher stress and increase their concentration, attention, job satisfaction, and relations with their colleagues, included a series of weekly yoga classes, monthly Nurturing the Inner Life meetings, a weekend residential retreat, and training and support in the use of a curriculum module for students. It was theorized that changes in the teachers would have a positive influence on the climate of their classrooms, which in turn would affect students’ wellness with regard to stress and frustration levels, attention, and acting out behaviors. In addition, the program was

intended to reach students directly through curriculum activities (Lantieri, Nagler et. al. 2011).

Teachers from the treatment and control groups completed a battery of surveys in the fall and spring of the 2007–2008 school year. Between-group analyses indicated several interesting and notable results with regard to teacher wellness, including reduced stress levels (as measured by one scale), increased levels of attention and mindfulness, and greater perceived relational trust among treatment teachers. Additionally, 3rd-grade students of treatment teachers perceived that they had significantly more autonomy and influence in their classes at the end of the school year than at the beginning, and analyses of student wellness indicated that the program had a significant, positive impact on reducing 3rd- and 4th-grade students' frustration levels.

### **Best Practices in Contemplative Teaching and Learning**

Learning to be more mindful and appreciative of silence is not likely to unfold in a straight line for either children or adults. There will be days when it might seem that nothing we're doing is working. Then suddenly, things will gel: when we lose our cool, one of our students might prompt us to take a breath and we'll realize just how deeply they have been integrating these ideas. Gradually, practicing to be still and reflective will feel less forced or artificial and will become more automatic and authentic. The ideal scenario is to have a daily quiet time in our classrooms. However, we might build up to this gradually.

Creating a "peace corner" in the classroom can also be helpful. A peace or calming corner is a special place that is set aside in the classroom. Young people can go there whenever they need calm and stillness, in order to regain their inner balance and

flow. It could also be used when a classroom member is feeling over-whelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally - times when being alone would be helpful. The whole class designs the space. Some peace corners include pictures or photos of some of students' favorite peaceful places, elements from nature, calming pictures, journals, chimes, and mandala coloring books, etc. Mandalas are harmonious patterns, which usually include a circle. Coloring these circles fosters the focused attention of mindfulness. The peace corner should be large enough for at least one student to lie down in, with comfortable pillows and a CD player and earphones with soothing music or recordings of sounds from nature. Children enjoy the opportunity to self-regulate their emotions in this way.

Transitions and other stressful times during the day (such as when you are getting ready for lunch or trying to meet other pressures of time) offer great opportunities to stop for a moment and honor the shift from one activity to another. The sound of soft, slow classical music can really help change the way we feel at such moments. Music could be used as background, but it's even more effective when there is a "music break." A "music break" involves stopping for as little as three minutes to listen quietly to a piece of music. Such breaks happen during times of transition when young people are focusing on something intently and need to stop, or when they start to feel the symptoms of heightened stress. It is a well-documented fact that listening to calming music has a direct correlation with a lowered respiration and heart rate, and can change our emotional moods.

One gift we can give ourselves and our children is that of silence and stillness; it is simple to give, but rarely given. We can find times in the school day to take a quick

break to pause and be still and quiet, and take a few deep breaths together. For example, if we have a habit of teaching right up until the end of the day, we might make it a classroom practice to have a few minutes of silence at the end of the day and ask young people to notice what they see, hear, feel, etc., during that time. We can also choose to bring moments of silence into other engaging activities, such as drawing, writing, or walking.

Helping young people know how to stay tuned to their bodily cues can also be helpful. When children are younger, they often have the ability to tune in to their bodies' signals. As they grow older, they get messages from the outer world to turn off their natural sensitivity. However, before they can release stress, they need first to be aware that they *are* stressed. We can model this awareness ourselves by making a note of times when our hearts are beating fast, our breathing has become shallow, or noticing other signs of stress. This helps students to notice their own stress triggers as well. When children have this kind of inner awareness, they start to be able to reduce the body's stress reaction itself.

Using literature can also provide a helpful way to strengthen young people's inner lives. Reading a book out loud together with young people can be a wonderful way to experience a contemplative moment - especially if it is done with intentionality. When reading a book, the pace is immediately slower, providing opportunities to pause along the way. Young people also experience one another's voices and can notice the various emotions that are stirring within each of them. There can be lots of unplanned moments where the story can take us to a deeper place.

## **Integrating Social Emotional Learning and Contemplative Education: A Hope for the Future**

There are so many potential opportunities for teachers to offer children the opportunity to nurture their inner lives. Michael Loeb, a third grade teacher, described his experience with this work in the following way:

I have been listening to the progressive relaxation exercise for “Ages 12 and Up” on the subway each morning. In class we tried the “Getting Relaxed – Ages 8-10.” Today, after two days of having gone through the whole lesson, several students noticed that it wasn’t in the schedule and exclaimed, “Hey, when are we doing the relaxation exercise today?” Another student in fact requested to listen to it by himself when he was upset and went into the “peace corner” and put on the headphones.

The children in Vera Slywinsky’s fourth grade classroom realized the importance of not only directly learning emotional and social skills but also creating the conditions in the classroom that would support the use of those skills. She describes the experience she and her children had with setting up a peace corner:

The most astounding development of introducing these techniques into my classroom has been the children’s interest in the peace corner. They have brought beautiful photos, postcards of warm and exotic places, and stuffed animals to decorate our corner. And they have not been at all hesitant to utilize it. Within the first week of its creation, I had a student whose uncle died after a long battle with cancer in Ecuador. Unfortunately the family couldn’t afford to attend the funeral. She was grateful for the peace corner. Another child was evicted from her home. The peace corner brought much comfort to her. Her family is now back in their space and okay but this student was able to find a way to deal with those unpleasant feelings at school so she could in fact be more ready to learn.

This simple addition in our classroom has allowed my students to seek peace amidst the turmoil they face in their lives daily. How foolish for those who think children can learn without acknowledging, and making space for processing the incredible challenges and painful obstacles they face. I am so happy that my children have collectively forged a safe place to begin to heal, survive, and appreciate the joy we have in supporting each other!

When I think about the children who are an integral part of my life, I ask myself: What is it I really want for them? What are some of the hopes I have for each of these children? A variety of answers arise, depending on the particular needs, strengths, and challenges of the child I am thinking of. However, I know that whether or not a child will successfully realize any of their hopes is dependent on whether or not we have equipped them with the inner strength they will need to meet the challenges of daily life. Are they capable of being resilient in the face of obstacles, as well as opportunities? Can they bounce back and even surpass their level of coping when the tests of life come their way?

We have got to give our children this kind of lifeline. The world is too uncertain for them not to build an inner reservoir of strength from which they can draw. The benefits are far reaching - from better health and increased ability to learn, to more fulfilled and happier lives. It is our responsibility as adults to prepare our children with all the skills and dispositions they will need to be the leaders we need them to be tomorrow. As Gandhi's words continue to remind us, we know how to help them "be the change we wish to see in the world."

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