Chapter 16
Anchoring Post-Secondary Readiness in Social-Emotional Learning

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ABSTRACT

Intentional social emotional instruction is often absent from most schools in the United States as students grow older. Few state legislatures have policies in place to mandate the integration of social emotional learning (SEL) into classroom instruction after 3rd grade. Rather than being recognized as a key component of all core content learning, SEL is framed as a set of reactive interventions that address specific adolescent challenges placing youth “at risk.” It is widely understood that social emotional competencies (SECs) grow with and influence emergent literacy among young learners. The same approach is often absent from approaches to literacy instruction for older struggling readers. This chapter underscores the opportunity to frame post-secondary preparation and texts connected to it as opportunities to explicitly teach social emotional competencies (SECs) as a means to plan for the future and heal from the past.

INTRODUCTION

Children stop learning to read and begin reading to learn in fourth grade. This phrase is often used to summarize the rapid shift in the focus of instruction in most classrooms in the United States that occurs in the middle elementary years. A more accurate framing may be that teachers often cease explicit reading instruction after third grade, with curriculum designed to delve deeper into reading comprehension rather than its mechanics. Children do not stop learning to read, but instruction shifts with the expectation that students “should” know how to read by fourth grade (Goldman et al., 2016; Loveless, 2021). Multiple research studies over decades have shown that strong literacy skills in third grade correlate with on-time graduation rates from 12th grade in the United States (Rumberger & Platsman, 2018; Feister, 2010). State-level standardized testing in the U.S. often begins in third grade for this reason.

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This same data has driven the passing of state legislation requiring the use of academic reading interventions in schools, leading to the production of a vast market of research-based reading interventions supporting early elementary reading skills (Auletto & Subleskie, 2018). If a student reaches upper elementary without mastering basic literacy skills, they may be relegated to remediated language arts classes as they struggle to keep pace with peers. This struggle grows greater and more emotionally stressful as students reach middle and high school (Paul & Clark, 2016). For students with diagnosed learning disabilities, this often increases the likelihood of psychological comorbidities, including anxiety and depression (Galuschka & Schulte-Körne, 2016). Direct reading instruction from 4th grade onward is categorized as an “intervention,” a means to get students back on track to grade-level literacy standards and expectations (Scammacca et al., 2016). The end of elementary school, combined with the rapid approach of post-secondary needs, including employment or college, adds the stress of impending academic struggle in a new setting (Anniko et al., 2019; Washington, 2009; Yang & Yan 2020).

As explicit reading instruction decreases or completely ceases, 4th grade is also often when explicit social emotional instruction ceases to be mandated by policy in most states. It is well understood that the development of Social Emotional Competencies (SECs) and the development of literacy skills support each other in early education (Cook et al., 2017; Zinns et al., 2007), however little attention is given to this pairing as children become adolescents. Educators are advised to structure lessons with text-to-world connections and authentic tasks to build investment among students to increase comprehension (Aslan, 2016). This presents an opportunity to leverage the social emotional implications of real-world connections to impact literacy skills among older struggling readers. Classroom based Social Emotional Learning (SEL) often ends up as an incidental byproduct of an academic experience rather than an intentional, parallel component of it. Accessing prior knowledge and use of real-world models are useful for making concepts more tangible to learners of all ages across all content areas (Espinoza, 2002; Goldman et al., 2016). Without intentionality, however, the focus of these real-world connections remains on academic concepts and content knowledge rather than SECs (Lieber & Tissiere, 2017). This is a missed opportunity, especially among older youth, to increase academic gains while contributing to student wellbeing with developmentally appropriate SEL.

Stakeholders and practitioners must recognize that intentional cultivation of SECs can be cultivated alongside literacy growth, and just as in the case of emergent readers, the two skill sets reinforce and support each other in secondary classroom settings with the intention of preparing students for post-secondary experiences. Connecting literacy to SEL is second nature to early childhood educators and can greatly serve educators supporting struggling older readers (Rosewater & Meyers, 2016). Specifically, the integration of real-world texts and tools, combines with developmentally appropriate approaches can serve to effectively facilitate literacy skill growth while holding workplace SECs at the center of learning (Clark, 2016). It is not completely accurate to say that “children stop learning to read and start reading to learn in fourth grade.” Just as students do not stop learning, the connected growth between SECs and literacy skills is not absent, it simply isn’t cultivated as explicitly or intentionally as in earlier years (Jiménez et al., 2019).

BACKGROUND

Curricular standards for SEL have their origins in responses to the Nation At Risk report, in which academic outcomes of students in the United States were directly tied to the moral downfall of America’s
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