On Common Ground. What Does Social and Emotional Learning Look Like in Your Library? – Part I

Article

by Mary Frances Zilonis and Chris Swerling, January 2018

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a hot topic in educational research, but what exactly is SEL? The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) states, SEL "is 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" (http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/). Nationwide, schools are grappling with how to bring SEL to their classrooms—and we are wondering how, as librarians, we are to bring SEL to the school library.

Why Is SEL Important?

For K-12 students, emotions are central to their being and their perception of themselves. Their self-esteem is reflected and affected by how they are perceived by their peers. Self-image can be fragile, especially among adolescents, who are continually trying to figure out who they are. For our vulnerable students—ELL, SPED, LGBTQ—they may be confronted daily with establishing their own identities within themselves and among their peers. Unless students feel safe and emotionally stable, they will have difficulty learning. For students to achieve, we need to consider how we can add SEL as a dimension our teaching. So far, eight states have partnered with CASEL to adopt these SEL Core Competencies:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decisionmaking

Making the Library Socially and Emotionally Friendly

Your demeanor is a barometer for students to measure your comfort level with them. If students feel unwelcome, their stress level will increase and they will not be able to learn much from you. We model our expectations for student interaction by how we interact with them.

Do you personally greet students? This is an excellent way to get to know students. When students feel they are known, they are more comfortable asking for assistance—and are less likely to act out. Whether in elementary, middle, or high school, try greeting each student with a smile and a hello. You will soon recognize repeat library users. Personal relationship building is key.

Physical spaces also impact SEL. Does the physical layout of your library accommodate a multitude of purposes? Is there space for individual quiet study balanced by spaces for groups to collaborate? Is there a white board, digital or otherwise, for students to use as they gather and brainstorm ideas? Is there a space for students to relax and socialize? Look critically. Are there ways you can transform your library from a traditional house of books to a center for engaged learning by and for students? What your library looks like sends a message as to what you value.

Think about displays. You may need to do some shifting and weeding to create space on shelves to display books with the covers facing out. This draws student attention to books you hope they will want to read. Displaying covers instead of spines increases browsing and encourages student choice. Do you actively solicit title suggestions from

students? Do you have books that reflect the social and emotional needs of your students? Establishing a library committee gives voice to the students and enables them to take a leadership role. Their feedback can be invaluable for material selection and programming suggestions.

Have you started a book club? For many students belonging to a book club is a social anchor. They become an accepted part of a group as they interact socially and can develop empathy through books read and discussed. Consider what other clubs you can host to provide a venue for students to work on relationship skills.

Look at your signage. Are your expectations visible? Are they communicated in a positive rather than a negative tone? Consider how to rephrase and restate your expectations so that they are short and positive. Example: "Please ask for permission to use the small group study rooms," rather than "Do not use the small group study rooms without permission." Students should know that each time they visit the school library the expectations for effort and behavior are the same.

In every way that we can, we need to continually communicate our basic SEL message, "You are welcome here."

Part Two is available here

Part Three is available here

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