Developing the Whole Child through Inquiry: Blending Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Competencies

Feature

I have always felt that my role as a school librarian and school library administrator was to nurture the development of the whole child. I tried to listen carefully and respond empathetically to the personal reasons behind students' questions and actions. When I reflect now, I realize that most of my responses were literacy-based; helping a teen find good information about cancer because her mother had just been diagnosed; purchasing and guiding students to well-written resources on LGBTQ issues; forming book discussion groups around teen problem novels. I realize that I only haphazardly built nurturing the whole child into the instructional program and the teaching of inquiry skills. The question that has not yet been resolved is: How can librarians nurture the whole child through inquiry?

An important first step is to move the focus of inquiry from **inquiry-as-a-process** to achieve specific academic goals to **inquiry-as-a-stance**. The difference? Inquiry-as-a-stance means adopting an attitude of inquiry when engaging with the world, in school and beyond. It means paying attention to one's own curiosities, interests, and passions and pursuing them using inquiry skills and attitudes. When students adopt inquiry-as-a-stance, they blend their cognitive skills with their social and emotional skills and dispositions. Inquiry becomes a way to experience their world. Students become mindful of their own strengths and motivated to learn on their own.

Adopting the inquiry-as-a-stance focus leads naturally to nurturing the whole child by integrating the teaching of social and emotional competencies along with the cognitive skills of inquiry. Most school librarians are aware of the essential cognitive skills required by inquiry and, hopefully, are teaching those on a regular basis. Perhaps less well-known are essential social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (www.casel.org) has defined five core competency areas for SEL: **self-awareness**, **self-management**, **social awareness**, **relationship skills**, and **responsible decision-making**. Two of the resources featured on this page provide an overview of the SEL competencies: CASEL's SEL Framework and a short video entitled "5 Keys to Social and Emotional Learning".

As I started to figure out what SEL competencies could be developed through inquiry, I encountered a body of literature that recognized the importance of fostering SEL development for higher academic achievement, but largely explored the teaching of SEL as discrete experiences rather than as integral aspects of academic-content learning experiences. My hope was to explore the synergies between SEL and inquiry, hypothesizing that inquiry learning is most effective when learners are interested, motivated, engaged, and self-aware and SEL competencies are most effectively developed when they are learned in an authentic context that enables learners to apply and practice the attitudes and skills.

Our challenge as librarians, then, is to decide which SEL competencies are most relevant to inquiry-as-a-stance learning, how those competencies can be developed over the years of school, and how they can be effectively taught and assessed. My sense is that SEL requires a new level of transparency and reflection by both teachers and learners. Just as we need to be explicit with students that we are teaching them the cognitive skills of analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and forming conclusions, so must we name and explicitly teach the SEL competencies. Students must be guided to recognize and reflect on their own development of competencies like curiosity, empathy, and self-confidence.

Although all five areas of the SEL competencies can be integrated into each phase of the inquiry cycle, specific competencies align very clearly with certain phases of inquiry. Each competency should be developed over the years of schooling so that their application is appropriate for the developmental level of the child. Here is some of my thinking to this point, using my model of inquiry as a frame. Note: Graphic organizers for teaching many of the competencies identified below are available for download in the Empire State Information Fluency Continuum (https://slsa-nys.libguides.com/ifc).

Connect

Students are motivated and prepared for an inquiry experience by developing an awareness of themselves, their multi-faceted identities, and their personal interests and prior knowledge **[Self-Awareness]**. A personal identity lesson in elementary can guide students to think about why they are special, what they are interested in, what they like and do not like, and what they are good at doing. They can be led to identify their own emotional and social strengths. In middle and high school, students can be taught to identify their own biases and perspectives. Students at all grade levels should be guided to use their own interests as a starting point for further exploration.

Wonder

Students can be led to develop questions that matter to them by enabling them to follow up on their own curiosities at elementary and identify and ask questions about gaps in their own knowledge about a subject of interest at the secondary level **[Self-Awareness].** Students display **Responsible Decision-Making** when they demonstrate curiosity and open-mindedness by asking questions that probe deeper than fact-gathering. Perhaps the most important, and least taught, SEL competencies at the Wonder phase are the **Self-Management** skills of taking risks and showing initiative by asking questions that will require deep explorations.

Investigate

The Investigate phase should be infused with attention to social and emotional competencies. Perspective taking and empathy **[Social Awareness]** can be nurtured from early elementary by teaching students to listen carefully to and respect their classmates' ideas. Through middle and high school, students can be taught to identify and respect cultural differences and diverse opinions. The **Self-Management** competencies of setting goals, forming a research plan, self-assessing, and reflecting are especially important throughout students' investigations; librarians can offer grade-appropriate strategies and tools to enable students to use those skills. Providing graphic organizers (e.g., a reflective notetaking template or self-assessment checkpoints) can enable students to manage their own inquiry process. Inquiry investigations are an ideal time to develop **Relationship Skills** as students are taught to collaborate, demonstrate respect for others, and show leadership in groups by ensuring that everyone contributes and has a voice.

Construct

Teaching students to recognize and form their own opinions, an essential aspect of inquiry, is a **Self-Awareness** competency that starts in pre-kindergarten when children share their reactions to stories and builds to high school students' being able to identify and recognize the effect of their own and others' points of view on the information they have gathered. Students demonstrate **Responsible Decision-Making** when they identify solutions to problems, make reasoned judgments, and draw evidence-based conclusions.

Express

Teaching students to share their new understandings effectively with their peers and other audiences incorporates SEL competencies of **Self-Awareness** (displaying self-confidence and agency), **Self-Management** (planning and organizing their presentations), and **Relationship Skills** (crafting their presentations to communicate most effectively to specific audiences).

Reflect

Although reflection is integral to the entire inquiry process, the Reflect phase at the end becomes valuable and robust when it incorporates the SEL competencies of a growth mindset **[Self-Management]** by asking students to assess their successes and challenges in both final product and inquiry process and to think about what new questions they have and what they want to learn about next. Students demonstrate **Responsible Decision-Making** when they articulate how they will apply their inquiry and SEL skills to the world beyond school.

Now is the critical time for school librarians to adopt a whole-child approach to inquiry (inquiry-as-a-stance) and integrate social and emotional learning into the library instructional program, especially given the impact of the pandemic on our young people, their learning, and their emotional well-being.

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