

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320068104>

The essential convergence of social-emotional learning, character, and school culture and climate for our students' success.

Article · January 2015

CITATIONS

0

READS

91

2 authors, including:



[Danielle Ryan Hatchimonji](#)

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

7 PUBLICATIONS 3 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

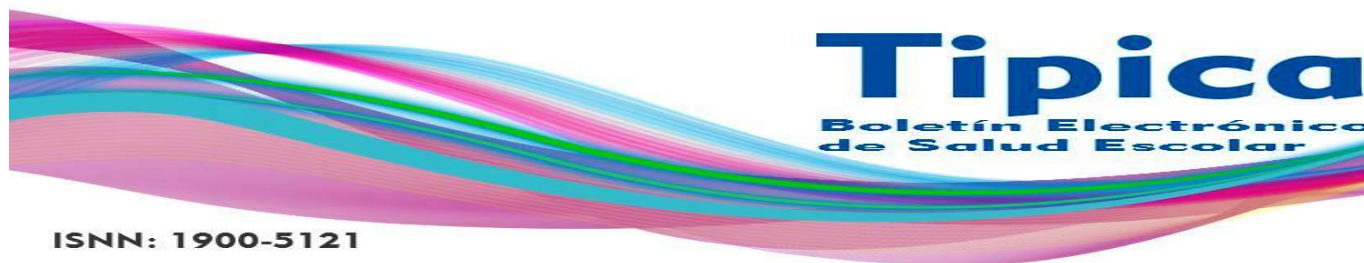
Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



MOSAIC: Social-Emotional and Character Development [View project](#)



Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab [View project](#)



THE ESSENTIAL CONVERGENCE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING, CHARACTER, AND SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE FOR OUR STUDENTS' SUCCESS

La Convergencia Esencial del Aprendizaje Socio-Emocional, el Carácter y el Clima y Cultura Escolar para el Éxito de Nuestros Estudiantes

Maurice J. Elias & Danielle P. Ryan
Rutgers University

Abstract

The current world poses a challenge for youth. They are constantly exposed to a predominant social chaos which often involves them directly. As a result of the lack of safe environments, and by being spectators of the relationships among others, the relation between climate and learning is indisputable. This relation implies that student learning requires safe, protected, cooperative, and well administered school environments. As a consequence, this paper has the goal of providing conceptual support for the pressing need to educate each student systematically from evidence-based approaches to promote the Social-Emotional and Character Development of all the students and the essential skills to participate in diverse social contexts. In addition to this conceptual framework, general guidelines are provided for intervention for the fostering of Social-Emotional and Character Development, and School Climate.

Key words: Learning, social-emotional learning, school climate, school culture, social-emotional competences, character, educational system.

Resumen

El mundo actual representa un reto para los jóvenes. Ellos están constantemente expuestos a un caos social predominante, que en muchos casos los implica directamente. Con la carencia de ambientes seguros y siendo observadores de las relaciones entre otros, resulta indiscutible la relación entre el clima y el aprendizaje. Esta relación implica que el aprendizaje por parte de los estudiantes, requiere que ellos estén en ambientes escolares seguros, cuidados, cooperativos y de buena gestión. En consecuencia de lo anterior, el presente escrito tiene como objetivo fundamental conceptualmente la imperiosa necesidad de educar cada estudiante sistemáticamente a partir de enfoques basados en la evidencia para promover el Desarrollo Socio-Emocional y del Carácter (DSEC) de todos los estudiantes y las habilidades esenciales para participar en diversos contextos sociales. Con esta fundamentación se ofrecen algunos lineamientos generales para la intervención en pro del Desarrollo Socio-Emocional, el Carácter (DSEC) y el Clima Escolar.

Palabras claves: Aprendizaje, aprendizaje socioemocional, clima escolar, cultura escolar, competencias socioemocionales, carácter, sistema educativo.

Contacto: rutgersmje@aol.com

Recibido: 2015-02-11, Enviado a evaluadores: 2015-02-11, Aceptado: 2015-03-01

Forces in the larger society and world that can no longer be kept out of the schoolhouse doors are eroding learning. The chaos we see in the world today, locally and globally, creates excessive and ongoing emotional burdens for our youth. They cannot avoid headlines that tell of terror and atrocities, both committed by and perpetrated on young people. And our schools are not the safe havens they should be. All too often, children are witnesses to uncivil speech, acts of physical aggression and bullying, academic cheating, and exclusion of “unwanted” or “different” students from lunch tables and other activities. It is common wisdom that students will emulate what adults do rather than what we say when the two are in conflict. In fact, students watch most carefully the interactions between educators, school administration, staff, parents and other students. These interactions provide a profound tutorial on character and the climate of the school as a community.

Deep learning, the kind that is not mobilized only for tests but rather to be put into practice into one’s life and work, requires engagement and being part of challenging, safe, respectful environments. The inextricable connection between climate and learning is one of the most important insights resulting from the convergence of brain research, research into the nature of human memory and learning, and the impact of context on behavior (Bechara, Damasio, & Bar-On, 2007; Blair, 2002; Kloos et al., 2011). Evidence is available internationally that schools must organize themselves effectively if students are to learn effectively, develop sound character, and see themselves and their learning as positive resources for their families, schools, workplaces, and communities (Elias, 2013).

Once we accept that attaining positive student outcomes requires that all students are in safe, caring, cooperative, well-managed learning environments, then it is a short journey to also accepting that students must be prepared to function effectively in those environments. Indeed, every student must be systematically taught evidence-based approaches to promote all students’ social-emotional and character development (SECD) and essential skills for

participating in a range of social contexts, including in the classrooms, lunchroom, school bus, community, family, and workplace setting. This means that every student should be systematically exposed to programming to support the growth of competencies needed to be healthy, civically engaged, and prepared to prevent and stand up against substance use, bullying, and violence in all its forms—the most corrosive influences on school life. In such ways, safe schools are sustained.

Next, we briefly provide details on the essential convergence of climate, social-emotional competencies, and character as part of all educational systems.

School Climate

The National School Climate Council in the United States (2007) recommends that school climate be defined as “patterns of school life experiences [that] reflect norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures” (p. 5). Research shows that positive school climate is associated with reduced aggression and violence (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010), reduced bullying behavior (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Meraviglia, Becker, Rosenbluth, Sanchez, & Robertson, 2003; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008), and reduced sexual harassment, regardless of sexual orientation (Attar-Schwartz, 2009). Students’ engagement or connectedness to school is another critical element of school climate. Safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climates foster attachment to school and provide students with the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000).

A positive school climate is a necessary but not sufficient condition for long-term positive outcomes. As noted earlier, students must be equipped with competencies and the moral compass to negotiate schools in productive ways. They must be able to take advantage of opportunities provided. These

competencies reflect the convergence of two long-standing areas of focus in schools, social-emotional learning (SEL) and character education, which we refer to as social-emotional and character development (SECD) (Elias, 2009, 2013). Truly, these areas are complementary and synergistic, as we discuss next.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

The SEL approach represents a comprehensive articulation of an ecological and developmental system for developing SEL competencies that have long been recognized as important for personal growth and effective performance in school, family, workplace, and civic contexts (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Elias, Zins, et al., 1997). These include the five sets of SEL competencies elaborated upon by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) (a) responsible decision making at school, home, and in the community, (b) self-management of emotions and behavior, (c) relationship skills, (d) social awareness, and (e) self-awareness. Included in those skills are a number of specific social-cognitive and emotional skills and processes that research shows underlie self-discipline and prosocial behaviors essential for learning.

The SEL approach places great emphasis on achieving social, emotional, and behavioral competencies via interactive contexts, particularly the relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves. Warm and supportive relationships foster the development of SEL skills, as seen in the internalization of teachers' values (Hughes, 2012), and are critical to effective classroom management (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008). Programs that focus on building close relationships between students and teachers have been found to be effective in reducing behavior problems (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010), especially with students at greatest risk (Tsai & Cheney, 2012).

An extensive review of the research related to SEL and student outcomes by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning suggests that positive student outcomes in school and life are most likely to be attained when students have greater attachment, engagement, and commitment to school (CASEL; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). This connection to school happens when students feel safe, feel welcomed, and believe they have opportunities for positive contributions, recognition, and a sense of purpose and pride in being part of the school. In other words, students want to go to schools that provide them with forms of engagement to which they can connect their emerging identities.

There is a wealth of research that has tested the efficacy of SEL programs. In the most comprehensive review of SEL interventions to date, which included a meta-analysis of 213 published studies of universal SEL interventions for children in preschool through 12th grade, Durlak et al. (2011) found statistically significant and meaningful improvements in social-emotional skills, socially appropriate behavior, positive attitudes, and academic performance. Additionally, statistically significant decreases were found in conduct problems and emotional distress.

An essential element of SEL programming is developmentally appropriate and sequenced practices that include proactive instruction in SEL skills—skills of how students think, feel, and act. SEL approaches seek to build an explicit set of social, emotional, and behavioral skills. Doing so requires a pedagogy for conveying the skills and for ensuring their application to real life contexts, which often is referred to as generalization. A unifying instructional pedagogy across SEL programs and across tiers has been articulated (Elias, 2004), making SEL highly adaptable to local circumstances and contexts (Elias, 2013).

The Connection to Character

It is also clear that while SEL provides the “technology” of competence, it is character that sets

direction, that provides that moral compass for growth and development, as well as moment-to-moment choices (Waangard, Elias, & Fink, 2014). Character development also plays an important role in promoting students’ ability to engage in school and feel connected to peers. Character strengths buffer against physical and mental health problems while also promoting prosocial youth development (Park, 2004; Shoshani & Slone, 2012). For example, acquiring a positive purpose is an important developmental milestone and a potentially protective character strength (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Purposeful adolescents are happier, are more protected from risky behaviors, and perform better in school than their less purposeful peers (Hill, Burrow, & Sumner, 2013). Strengths of character are associated with successful recovery from the effects of trauma (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006).

For many youth around the world today, living in disadvantaged circumstances, we believe the convergence of SEL and character development must be integrated into educational practice to adequately prepare them to face and overcome the many challenges their lives will provide. They need SEL skills and character dispositions to live lives with diligence and creative path-making, opportunities to exercise generosity and service in the present, a positive sense of the future, and forgiveness—to not be unduly weighted down by the past and current circumstances and to both experience and see a real purpose for themselves. Schools must be organized to become places where SEL, character, and knowledge are inseparable (Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014).

Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) and School Climate: Fundamental Principles of Intervention

The growing world-wide concern with SECD and school culture and climate also has led to greater understanding of how to implement these in schools (Berkowitz, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2013;

Elias, Zins et al., 1997). Here is some of what we know:

- Effective SECD programs must be evidence-based and carried out in coordinated, continuous ways
- Schools must have a set of core values, principles and themes that pervade all aspects of their functioning, and students, staff, and community must be articulate about and engaged in “living” those values in and out of school
- SECD and school culture and climate must be supported by an infrastructure within the school if sustainability is to take place
- SECD must reach all students and universal SECD efforts likely need to be supplemented to reach low performing students and students with existing behavior and emotional difficulties
- Schools can and must create learning environments—including classrooms and other school spaces—that are respectful, orderly, safe, academically challenging, caring, involving/engaging, and well-managed
- Staff must have a positive view of the school climate, their roles, and their students
- SECD cannot be confined to a class period but rather must be integrated into all academic areas and applied to classrooms, school rules and norms, service opportunities, and athletic and other performances, and must include all students.

Those wishing to embark on SECD and school climate improvement need to derive both inspiration and tangible assistance from the many who have, and are currently “walking the walk” already (cf. enseceurope.org; www.edutopia.org; www.CASEL.org; www.character.org; www.schoolclimate.org; Elias, 2003, 2013). There is no reason to reinvent the wheel, though past efforts likely will have to be adapted to fit local circumstances. Students are waiting for the adults

who are responsible for them to act in their interests. They have been waiting too long already and deserve our urgent efforts on their behalf.

CONCLUSION

Imagine if all schools shared this vision:

Students entering our school will feel they have a positive purpose in being there. They will feel engaged, attached, and connected, and see our school as a place they can learn and do things to contribute to the world around them, advance their sense of purpose, and become more literate in academic, media, artistic, and civic areas. This will be accomplished in part because the students will experience coordinated and continuous efforts to build their social-emotional skills, positive character, service-learning contributions, and health, and to prevent substance abuse and violent/bullying behavior in a safe, civil, caring, supportive, inspiring, and ethical school climate.

Now, let's stop imagining, and start acting. There is no reason why this vision cannot become the prevailing reality, if we have the will to make it so.

REFERENCES

- Appleton, J. J., Christenson, S. L., & Furlong, M. J. (2008). Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*, 369–386.
- Attar-Schwartz, S. (2009). Peer sexual harassment victimization at school: The roles of student characteristics, cultural affiliation, and school factors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 79*, 407–420.
- Bechara, A., Damasio, A. R., & Bar-On, R. (2007). The anatomy of emotional intelligence and implications for educating people to be emotionally intelligent. In R. Bar-On, J. Maree, & M. J. Elias (Eds.), *Educating people to be emotionally intelligent*. Westport, CT: Praeger. (International edition published by Heinemann, Johannesburg, South Africa.)
- Berkowitz, M. W. (2011). Leading schools of character. In A. M. Blankstein & P. D. Houston (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice and democracy in our schools* (pp. 93-121). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Birkett, M., Espelage, D. L., & Koenig, B. W. (2009). LGB and questioning students in schools: The moderating effects of homophobic bullying and school climate on negative outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 38*, 989–1000.
- Blair, C. (2002). School readiness: Integrating cognition and emotion in a neurobiological conceptualization of children's functioning at school entry. *American Psychologist, 57*, 111-127.
- Blum, R. W., McNeely, C. A., & Rinehart, P. M. (2002). Improving the odds: The untapped power of schools to improve the health of teens (Research report). Retrieved from <http://www.casac.org/pdfs/ImprovingtheOdds.pdf>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brookmeyer, K. A., Fanti, K. A., & Henrich, C. C. (2006). Schools, parents, and youth violence: A multilevel, ecological analysis. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 35*, 504–514.
- CASEL. (2003). *Safe and sound: An education leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(3), 119–128.
- Driscoll, K.C., & Pianta, R.C. (2010). Banking Time in Head Start: Early efficacy of an intervention designed to promote supportive teacher-child relationships. *Early Education and Development, 21*, 38-64.
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*, 405–432.

- Eisenberg, N., Fabes, R. A., & Spinrad, T. L. (2006). Prosocial behavior. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.), & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development* (6th ed., pp. 646–718). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Elias, M. J. (2003). *Academic and social-emotional learning* (Educational Practices Booklet No. 11). Geneva, Switzerland: International Academy of Education and the International Bureau of Education (UNESCO).
- Elias, M. J. (2004). The connection between social-emotional learning and learning disabilities: Implications for intervention. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 27 (1), 53-63.
- Elias, M. J. (2009). Social-emotional and character development and academics as a dual focus of educational policy. *Educational Policy*, 23(6), 831–846.
- Elias, M. J. (Ed.) (2013). Promoting students' social-emotional and character development and preventing bullying. Special issue of the *Korean Journal of Educational Policy*, 10 (3), entire.
- Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Frey, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., ... Shriver, T. P. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for Educators*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Goldstein, S. E., Young, A., & Boyd, C. (2008). Relational aggression at school: Associations with school safety and social climate. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 37, 641–654.
- Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 62, 60–71.
- Gregory, A., Cornell, D., Fan, X., Sheras, P., Shih, T., & Huang, F. (2010). Authoritative school discipline: High school practices associated with lower student bullying and victimization. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 483–496.
- Hamre, B. K., Pianta, R. C., Downer, J. T., & Mashburn, A. J. (2008). Teachers' perceptions of conflict with young students: Looking beyond problem behaviors. *Social Development*, 17, 115-136.
- Hill, P. L., Burrow, A. L., & Sumner, R. (2013). Addressing important questions in the field of adolescent purpose. *Child Development Perspectives*, 7(4), 232–236.
- Hughes, J. N. (2012). Teachers as managers of students' peer context. In A. M. Ryan & G.W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and adjustment at school* (pp. 189-218). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Kloos, B., Hill, J., Thomas, E., Wandersman, A., Elias, M. J., & Dalton, J. (2011). *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities* (3rd Ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Meraviglia, M. G., Becker, H., Rosenbluth, B., Sanchez, E., & Robertson, T. (2003). The expect respect project: Creating a positive elementary school climate. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 18, 1347–1360.
- Meyer-Adams, N., & Conner, B. T. (2008). School violence: Bullying behaviors and the psychosocial school environment in middle schools. *Children & Schools*, 30, 211–221.
- National School Climate Council. (2007). *The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy*. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/school-climate-challenge.pdf> on May 5, 2014.
- Nucci, L., Narvaez, D., & Krettenauer, T. (2014). *Handbook of moral and character education* (2nd Ed) Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis.
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 323–367.
- Park, N. (2004). Character strengths and positive youth development. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 40-54.
- Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). Greater strengths of character and recovery from illness. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1, 17–26.
- Shoshani, A., & Slone, M. (2013). Middle school transition from the strengths perspective: Young adolescents' character strengths, subjective well-being, and school adjustment. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14(4), 1163-1181.
- Tsai, S-F., & Cheney, D. (2012). The impact of the adult-child relationship on school adjustment for children at risk of serious behavior problems. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 20, 105-114.

- Wangaard, D., Elias, M. J., & Fink, K. (2014). Educating the head, heart, and hand for the 21st century. *SEEN: Southeast Education Network*, 16 (2), 16-19.
- Zins, J., Weissberg, R.P., Wang, M. C., Walberg, H.J. (Eds.) (2004). *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.