Taking the Debate to the Next Level

For many years, considerable debate centered on the question, ‘Is social-emotional learning relevant to school success?’ Although discussion lingers, this question appears to have been answered affirmatively, especially for children most at risk for school failure. Particularly when we consider outcomes that extend beyond performance on standardized reading and math achievement tests, it is clear that social-emotional skills are significant for classroom performance, school success, and later life achievement, and that the academic problems of the most at-risk children are related to their social-emotional functioning. Durlak and Weissberg [2011] focused their attention on a second, related question: Can we improve the social and emotional skills of students, and does it benefit their learning, achievement, and behavior at school? Their review also answers this question affirmatively and, in doing so, they added evidence to the connection between social-emotional learning and school achievement. In addition, Durlak and Weissberg appropriately draw their attention to the importance of program quality and its implementation. To be done well, efforts to improve social-emotional learning must be done carefully, and they must be thoughtfully applied to the local context.

But there are additional questions that should not be overlooked in the debate about social-emotional learning and school achievement. I propose that two are particularly important at this time.

The first is: When should we begin taking into account children’s social-emotional skills? This question draws attention to the fact that most of the interventions to improve social-emotional learning are focused on children in the school years. But for many children, this begins too late. As the work of Raver et al. [2011], Trentacosta and Izard [2007], and others have shown, social-emotional competencies are important to preschoolers’ classroom performance and school readiness [see generally Denham, Chavaughn, & Domitrovich, 2010]. This research evidence is consistent with the experience of practitioners, who report that young children who are poorly prepared for classroom learning are distinguished more by their social-emotional and self-regulatory deficiencies than by their problems in letter or number identification [Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000]. By the time these children appear in elementary school, potentially serious
problems in classroom engagement, self-confidence, social competence, self-control, as well as academic preparation are becoming consolidated. Moreover, with increasing numbers of preschoolers enrolled in prekindergarten, preschool, Head Start, and other early childhood education programs, opportunities to identify and address these social-emotional problems are greater than ever before.

Recognizing this, many states are incorporating into their early childhood learning standards attention to the social-emotional and self-regulatory ingredients of school readiness and academic success. The California Department of Education, for example, has recently published its Preschool Learning Foundations that include (at the urging of early childhood practitioners) learning benchmarks in social-emotional development as well as in language/literacy, mathematics, and English-language development [CDE, 2008; see http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/]. The social-emotional benchmarks include developmental expectations concerning self-regulation, initiative in learning, group participation, social and emotional understanding, cooperation and responsibility, peer interactions, relationships with teachers, and other areas. These learning benchmarks are complemented by curricular guidelines that provide teachers with guidance about how to foster these skills. At the same time, promising interventions to enhance social-emotional skills in young children are being evaluated and scaled up in field settings [Domitrovich, Moore, Thompson, et al., in press].

Extending the developmental window concerning the connection between social-emotional learning and school achievement leads naturally to a second question: What social-emotional skills are most influential at what ages? This question is also important because the social-emotional constituents of academic success are not the same for preschoolers and high schoolers, and thus a one-size-fits-all approach is not likely to work. Although social-emotional learning interventions are often well tailored to the specific characteristics and risk factors of their target populations, there has not been comparable attention to the developmental variability in how to approach social-emotional learning with children of different ages. Further attention to this question can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of efforts to improve social-emotional skills in ways that enhance academic success.

With preschoolers, for example, self-regulation and social-emotional understanding are among the most important intervention targets for enlisting social-emotional learning into school achievement [Raver et al., 2011; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007]. This reflects the developmental characteristics of young children: managing feelings, impulses, and attention is challenging because of neurobiological immaturity, as are skills for cooperating with and managing the competing interests of other children and teachers. By late childhood and adolescence, however, advances in cognitive and brain development enable greater attention to skills in social problem-solving, responsible decision-making, managing peer pressure, intergroup understanding, values and character education, civic engagement, and other social-emotional competencies. These are
issues that, by contrast, are much less relevant to young children. Thus although some social-emotional skills – such as self-regulation – are relevant to learning across the developmental spectrum, many other skills are likely to be salient in relation to the developmental competencies and challenges of specific stages of growth.

There has been little serious attention to this issue in the field of social-emotional learning, and tackling this issue would help take the debate concerning social-emotional learning and academic achievement to the next level. Just as the cognitive skills that children acquire change with development, so also do the social-emotional skills that support learning and achievement.

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References


