

## Strategies to Infuse Social and Emotional Learning into Academics

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Examining the impact of curricula that build students' social and emotional learning (SEL) along with their academic achievement is a complex task. This chapter explores this issue through the lens of one particular program, Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS), which has been in operation for over 2 decades. SEL curricula are not simple instructional units but rather create caring learning contexts through their implementation. Therefore, looking at the way in which one program conceptualizes and approaches building social-emotional skills in students, and their generalization to academic domains, may provide the richness of understanding needed to help move research and practice ahead in this critical area.

Much has been written about social decision-making and problem-solving processes. As an approach to education, it has an extensive lineage, going at least back to the work of John Dewey (1933). In recent years, the work of the SDM/SPS project has been the vanguard of this approach. It began in 1979 as a collaboration among Rutgers University, the then-University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey—Community Mental Health Center at Piscataway, and the schools, particularly in New Jersey. Years of collaborative field research and development with teachers, administrators, and parents led to the development of curriculum and instructional procedures and extensive implementation strategies (Elias, 1993; Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000; Elias & Clabby, 1989). Essential to the success of SDM/SPS is its strong linkage with the academic development of children; current understanding of the conceptual, pragmatic, and empirical aspects of this linkage is the focus of this chapter.

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## OVERVIEW OF THE SDM/SPS CURRICULUM APPROACH

SDM/SPS curricula (Elias, 1993; Elias & Clabby, 1989; Elias, Friedlander, & Tobias, 2001; Elias & Tobias, 1996) operationalize a set of skills linked empirically with social competence and peer acceptance in the areas of self-control, social awareness and group participation, and critical thinking. The skills are organized into three domains, readiness, instructional, and application. Instructional design is as important as content. Systematic skill-building procedures are used as the framework for all curriculum units. The structure includes the following:

- Introducing the skill concept and motivation for learning; presentation of the skill in concrete behavioral components
- Modeling behavioral components and clarifying the concept by descriptions and behavioral examples of not using the skill
- Providing opportunities for practice of the skill in “kid-tested,” enjoyable activities, to allow for corrective feedback and reinforcement until skill mastery is approached
- Labeling the skill with a prompt or cue, to establish a “shared language” that can be used to call for the skill in future situations
- Giving assignments for skill practice outside of the structured lesson
- Providing follow-through activities and ways to use prompts in academic content areas and everyday interpersonal situations

### Readiness for Decision Making

This domain targets skill areas that give children valuable tools for effective social decision making and interpersonal behavior in the classroom, in the schoolyard, and with peers, family, and employers. The readiness domain includes two units, Self-Control and Social Awareness. The Self-Control Unit refers to internal or personal skills necessary for self-regulation and monitoring, while the Social Awareness Unit focuses on external social skills and awareness linked with successful participation in a group.

The Self-Control Unit includes skills such as listening, turn taking, remembering, and following a series of directions. The heart of the unit focuses on skills for regulating emotional reactions and impulsivity and developing the skills needed for social literacy. Children learn to recognize personal physical cues and situations that put them at risk of fight-or-flight reactivity and result in negative consequences and poor decisions. They also are taught skills for gaining control and access to clear thinking. Linked with the skill of regulating emotion is the ability to apply self-control in the context of interpersonal communication. Students are taught to self-monitor their body language, eye

contact, the way they put their message into words, and their tone of voice, and to attend to similar signals from others.

The Social Awareness Unit emphasizes skills characteristic of children who are accepted by their peers. Research in peer relationships has found that children respond positively to peers that praise, compliment, and express positive emotion and appreciation for others. They also recognize and respond when peers need help; recognize when they need help and appropriately ask for it; and give criticism or negative feedback by clearly stating what they do not like, give reasons, and offer new ideas. They also accept constructive criticism appropriately and can take another’s perspective. Lessons in this unit target these skills, in addition to activities for group building; practice in expressing feelings and thoughts in a group; and the characteristics of friendship, the importance of being a good friend, and choosing good friends.

### Instructional Phase

This domain targets an eight-step framework for organizing clear thinking. The eight thinking skills are worded in language designed to provide children with a “self-talk” strategy they can use to think through a problem or make a decision. They are presented descriptively in Figure 7.1, using the acronym “FIG TESPN” as an organizing framework. The following version of FIG TESPN is presented to children in SDM/SPS curricula and related interventions:

- Feelings are my cue to problem solve.
- I have a problem.
- Goals guide my actions.
- Think of many possible things to do.
- Envision the outcomes of each solution.
- Select your best solution, based on your goal.
- Plan, practice, anticipate pitfalls, and pursue your best solution.
- Next time, what will you do—the same thing or something different?

FIG TESPN (and other comprehensive problem-solving and decision-making strategies) provides a centralized way for students to understand a strategy they can invoke when they confront a problem or decision (Wales, Nardi, & Stager, 1986). The unique name, FIG TESPN, is also a mnemonic that reinforces memory. In addition, it is a convenient prompt for teachers to use; for example, they can ask a student, “How can FIG TESPN help you with this problem?” (This point will be revisited later in the chapter.)

The objective of the instructional phase is student over-learning and internalization of a framework for thinking through a problem or making a

**Figure 7.1.** FIG TESPN framework for clear thinking.

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*When children or adults are using their social decision-making/social problem-solving skills, they are:*

1. Focusing on signs of feelings in themselves and others.
  2. Identifying issues or problems.
  3. Guiding themselves with goals they have identified.
  4. Thinking of many alternative solutions or ways to get to their goals.
  5. Envisioning possible consequences in strong visual detail.
  6. Selecting their best solution, the one that will get them to their goal.
  7. Planning, practicing, and preparing for obstacles before acting.
  8. Noticing what happened when they acted and using the information for future problem solving.
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decision. Because of this, continual review and recitation are built into the program. Students learn and practice these steps in diverse developmentally appropriate and salient contexts so that when they are under pressure and/or not under adult supervision, they will turn to their readiness skills and use FIG TESPN.

#### **Application Phase**

This domain focuses on structured opportunities to practice the application of the skills to everyday problems and decisions and within the context of academic content areas. Two areas are emphasized: structured lessons and facilitative questioning.

**Application Phase Lessons (Structured Lessons).** Sample lesson plans, worksheets, and concrete examples show how to integrate practice of the SDM skills into a wide variety of topic areas, such as social studies, stereotyping and prejudice, creative writing, and starting and completing projects.

**Facilitative Questioning.** Although the application phase provides concrete tools that teachers can use to launch their efforts to integrate social decision-making skills into everyday use, structured lessons are by no means the only way to help children practice their skills. Teachers model both readiness skills

and FIG TESPN and translate FIG TESPN into questions that prompt an individual or group to think through a problem. Once students are trained in the discrete skills targeted in the curriculum, opportunities for extending the use or practice of these skills are almost endless. FIG TESPN and the readiness prompts and cues become a shared language to elicit use of skills and to promote transfer, generalization, and maintenance of skills beyond the classroom walls. Playground aides, bus drivers, school nurses, and other school staff as well as parents and other adults in the community can be trained to prompt and promote children's SDM/SPS abilities.

#### **Evidence for Effectiveness**

Relative to children who were not participants in SDM/SPS programs, children involved in the programs derived many benefits (Bruene-Butler, Hampson, Elias, Clabby, & Schuyler, 1997; Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991). These included the following:

- Greater sensitivity to others' feelings
- Better understanding of the consequences of their behavior
- Increased ability to size up interpersonal situations and plan appropriate actions
- Higher self-esteem
- More positive prosocial behavior
- More positive behavior and leadership behaviors with peers
- Better transition to middle school
- Lower than expected levels of antisocial, self-destructive, and socially disordered behavior, even when followed up into high school
- Improvement in their learning-to-learn skills in academic areas that had been infused with social decision making
- Improved use of skills in self-control, social awareness, and social decision making and problem solving in situations occurring both inside and outside the classroom

Recent replications of many of these original findings have been carried out. For example, extent of teacher acquisition of skills in "dialoguing" and "facilitative questioning" met or exceeded those of the original sample in new sites assessed. Comparing a replication site in Oregon and the original New Jersey site, use of inhibitory questioning strategies by teachers declined from pretest to posttest by 40% and 53%, respectively; use of facilitative questioning increased by 35% and 117%, respectively. With regard to the acquisition of skills in interpersonal sensitivity, problem analysis, and planning, students in all recent dissemination sites showed significant pre-post

gains; the effect sizes in all cases were equal to or as much as twice as large as those in the original validation sample (cf. Bruene-Butler et al., 1997).

Most recently, the program was designated as a model for Goal #7 by the National Education Goals Panel (Safe, Drug Free Schools) and as a Promising Program by the U.S. Department of Education's Expert Panel on Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools. Data also show that children, teachers, and other educators enjoy the program and put its principles to regular and frequent use. Taken together, the evidence gathered to date indicates that the SDM/SPS approach is effective and feasible in diverse settings.

### THE SDM/SPS-ACADEMICS CONNECTION

Integrating SDM/SPS into the academic work of students builds their social-emotional learning skills and enriches their academics by linking cognitive and social and emotional processes. Readiness skills are essential for students to accomplish the following academic and learning tasks (among many others too numerous to list here):

- Understanding assignments and test instructions accurately
- Examining passages of text patiently and extracting necessary information across a wide range of academic subject areas
- Delaying gratification long enough to think about difficult choices on exams, or to prepare well for those exams
- Participating in cooperative learning groups
- Completing homework and short- and long-term projects in an organized way

Beyond the readiness skills, the critical thinking skills denoted by FIG TESPAN are the cornerstone of academic understanding and sustained achievement. This is true both in terms of mastering the intricacies of a subject area and addressing the numerous everyday decisions that are part of life in school and among peers and family. Consider how well a student would function with deficiencies in any one, two, or three FIG TESPAN skills. Imagine if the deficiencies occurred in only two or three school or home situations. Is there any doubt that the student would be at risk for academic difficulty, for substance abuse, and for not functioning as a healthy, productive adult citizen (Benard, Fafoglia, & Perone, 1987)?

#### Empirical Evidence for the SDM/SPS Link to Academics

Formalization of an application phase appears to be important for helping create a linkage between SDM/SPS and academics in which use of the skills

in the social-emotional domain reinforces use of the skills in the academic domain. Children come to understand that the skills have universal applicability to all aspects of their life.

Elias and Clabby (1992) found that adding the application phase to an SDM/SPS instructional phase already focused on social-emotional contexts led to significant generalization to indices of academic progress in fourth and fifth graders in a blue-collar, suburban elementary school. Application lessons were in language arts and social studies, academic areas in which progress was anticipated to occur.

Report card grades were examined between marking periods 1 and 2, 2 and 3, and 2 and 4. A series of multivariate analyses of covariance in a 2-by-2 design (grades 4 and 5, SDM/SPS curriculum instructional phase only vs. instructional plus application phases) showed no differences between marking periods 1 and 2, the time when students received standard SDM/SPS instruction. However, between marking periods 2 and 3 and 2 and 4, significant interaction effects at the  $p < .005$  level were found. Fifth graders showed the greatest gains in language arts; the only group not showing gain was the instructional phase only group; fourth graders receiving the application phase showed the greatest gains in social studies. It should be noted that math and science grades were examined also as a form of control on grade inflation, and no changes of any kind were observed.

Although these findings await replication, they do suggest that transfer of SDM/SPS and related SEL approaches to academics not only is a function of the generalized improvement of the learning context, but also is aided by fostering specific contexts of application. A series of examples follows showing how FIG TESPAN is integrated into various aspects of academics, including traditional academic areas (language arts, social studies), personal and social development (health, family life education), and project and problem-based learning (group projects, inclusion, service learning) (Elias, 1993; Elias & Tobias, 1996). Following these sections, the special challenges of accomplishing this in the urban environment will be outlined.

#### Language Arts and Literature: Characters Making Decisions and Solving Problems

Much of what children read involves characters in stories making decisions, reacting to conflict, coping with strong feelings, and otherwise navigating the tricky waters of interpersonal situations. Therefore, it makes sense to have students apply the FIG TESPAN framework when reading a story (Naftel & Elias, 1995). Formats for carrying out "book talks" in this manner can be found in Figure 7.2. Note that there is a simplified format for beginning readers.

When implementing book talks, teachers introduce early in the discussions consideration of how the characters feel about the situations they are

**Figure 7.2.** SDM/SPS applied to literature analysis and book talks.

1. Think of an event in the section of the book assigned. When and where did it happen? Put the event into words as a problem.
2. Who were the people that were involved in the problem? What were their different feelings and points of view about the problem? Why did they feel as they did? Try to put their goals into words.
3. For each person or group of people, what are some different decisions or solutions to the problem that he, she, or they thought of that might help in reaching their goals?
4. For each of these ideas or options, what are all of the things that might happen next? Envision and write both short- and long-term consequences.
5. What were the final decisions? How were they made? By whom? Why? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
6. How was the solution carried out? What was the plan? What obstacles were met? How well was the problem solved? What did you read that supports your point of view?
7. Notice what happened and rethink it. What would you have chosen to do? Why?
8. What questions do you have, based on what you read? What questions would you like to be able to ask one or more of the characters? The author? Why are these questions important to you?

#### **Simplified Book Talk Format for Young Readers**

I will write about this character . . .

My character's problem is . . .

How did your character get into this problem?

How does the character feel?

What does the character want to happen?

What questions would you like to be able to ask the character you picked, one of the other characters, or the author?

in. This prompts inferential thinking and allows for expansion of students' emotional vocabularies. Students then can identify the problem and goal in their own words, which also facilitates reading comprehension. Indeed, sometimes students must go back and look at the text quite carefully to resolve differences in opinion about what a character's goal might be.

Not only can students discuss and evaluate the options chosen by characters, they also can speculate about other possible options that a character

might have taken. It is quite instructive to end Chapter 4 of a book and have the students consider what they might be reading in Chapter 5, based on an SDM/SPS analysis of the story thus far. Students can discuss options and potential outcomes, as well as evaluate any plans made by characters. Further, students enjoy inferring what happens after the story ends, with ideas for sequels becoming in-class written projects or homework assignments.

High school students can use book talk formats to consider the author's writing process. An author must make decisions about writing and solving the problem of how to convey certain feelings, goals, and the like through the written medium. Students gain great insight into writing by studying about authors and then reading a book from a formative point of view. Authors' styles, paraphrasing, use of language, and ways of having plans and outcomes crafted all can be analyzed. Dramatic tension, irony, and conflict can be understood as options and techniques for particular purposes. What feelings does the author want to convey in a particular chapter? What possibilities does the author have with regard to how to advance the plot? Using the SDM/SPS framework as a metacognitive guide for studying the writing process can enrich students' depth of understanding considerably.

The proliferation of highly structured approaches to reading and literacy in schools may limit the easy applicability of frameworks like this. However, school mental health practitioners and consultants can use the literature format to create such things as "book talk" clubs or literary review magazines and clubs, or apply the framework to the analysis of scripts of plays, movies, and even television programs. Such activities provide school professionals with innovative and stigma-free ways to build students' academic, interpersonal, and social problem-solving skills, among both at-risk and other youth populations.

#### **Social Studies: Persons and Groups Engaging in Historically Based Decisions**

Instruction in social studies (or civics or related topic areas) can become an engaging experience that emphasizes how decisions have been, and continue to be, made in the context of history. Both history and current events can be thought of as a series of decisions made by individuals and groups, often in response to actual or anticipated problems, accompanied by strong feelings, reflecting certain goals, options, consequences, plans, and implications for the future. Figure 7.3 provides an example of FIG TESPAN adapted for use in current events instruction. Consider how often current events are discussed without any way to provide a unifying cognitive framework for students to use outside the school-based context. Current events lessons are an opportune time for school practitioners to bring SEL to students and also to

**Figure 7.3.** Thinking about current events.

1. What is the event that you are thinking about? When and where is it happening? Put the event into words as a problem or choice or decision.
2. What people or groups were involved in the problem? What are their different feelings? What are their points of view about the problem?
3. What do each of these people or groups want to have happen? Try to put their goals into words.
4. For each person or group, name some different options or solutions to the problem that they think might help them reach their goals. Add any ideas that you think might help them that they might not have thought of.
5. For each option or solution you listed, picture all the things that might happen next. Envision long- and short-term consequences.
6. What do you think the final decision should be? How should it be made? By whom? Why?
7. Imagine a plan to help you carry out your solution. What could you do or think of to make your solution work? What obstacles or roadblocks might keep your solution from working? Who might disagree with your ideas? Why? What else could you do?
8. Rethink it. Is there another way of looking at the problem that might be better? Are there other groups, goals, or plans that come to mind?

introduce teachers to the academic benefits of FIG TESPN and social problem solving.

The framework in Figure 7.3 is easily adapted for analyzing historical events. It is fascinating to help children understand a particular historical event from the perspective of the different participating groups involved. I recall vividly working with middle school students during the Reagan years and how these students were not able to grasp initially that the Soviet Union had its own particular sets of feelings and goals with regard to its relationship to the United States and other nations. But the very framework of FIG TESPN implied strongly to the students that different groups often do have different perspectives, and they eventually gained many insights into the nature of international relationships. It is likely that difficulties in perspective taking and empathy have helped fuel tragic events in the Middle East, Balkans, and Africa.

Certainly, there is greater flexibility in social studies instruction, and certainly in teaching current events, than there is in language arts and reading. Therefore, it is easier to infuse FIG TESPN into the mainstream of so-

cial studies. However, nonclassroom variations, such as the creation of a newspaper club for students (including those with behavioral problems), have been shown to improve students' social studies skills and also improve their ability to read and understand current events and historical material (Haboush & Elias, 1993).

**Incorporating Historically Based Readings.** Social problem-solving frameworks articulate well with social studies literature at all grade levels (Alexander & Crabtree, 1988). For young readers, books such as *Watch the Stars Come Out* by Riki Levinson (in the Dutton Reading Rainbow Library edition) contain stories that relate to historical periods (in this case, the immigration from Europe to the Land of Liberty). Older readers would enjoy anthologies that focus not only on history but America's diversity, such as *In the Spirit of Peace* (Defense for Children-International), *Goodbye Vietnam* (Knopf), *Growing Up Asian American* (Morrow), and *Visions of America: Personal Narratives from the Promised Land* (Persea Books). A continuing source of information in this area is the magazine *Teaching Tolerance*, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center ([www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)).

The FIG TESPN framework can be used to help students think more deeply about the issues presented in these and other sources. Consider a series of FIG TESPN-derived questions focused on the topic of emigration:

- How did they feel about leaving their countries?
- What countries were they leaving?
- What problems were going on that made them want to leave?
- What problems would leaving bring about?
- What would have been their goals in leaving or staying?
- What were their options and how did they envision the results of each possibility?
- What plans did they have to make? What kinds of things got in their way at the last minute? How did they overcome the roadblocks?
- Once they arrived, how did they feel? What problems did they encounter at the beginning? What were their first goals?

To help students find fact-based answers to questions posed and check their own views, further reading and research can be assigned. And there are obvious parallels to be drawn in the context of understanding the current diversity of one's classroom, school, or community.

**FIG TESPN and 9/11.** Although the evidence is only anecdotal, there is reason to believe that schools in which SDM/SPS and related SEL programs already existed were well able to address and respond to the events of

September 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Teachers were prepared to address the social-emotional needs of students, while the mental health and crisis teams were still being organized and mobilized. FIG TESPN and related problem-solving strategies were used as tools to help children sort through an incredibly complex and charged set of facts and feelings. Perhaps most important, the tools of SDM/SPS were found to be instruments not only of reflection but of action. Children were helped to think through how they would cope with the situation most immediately and then what they could do to help. And the problem-solving/decision-making approach continued to be used regularly in the days afterward to continually enhance children's understanding and channel their need for contribution.

### Health and Family Life Education: Making Choices About How to Live

Health educators, to an increasing degree, are identifying sound decision making around health-related behaviors as an overarching instructional goal (Allensworth, 1997). Therefore, students can be taught that use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco, steroids, and other drugs, like all other health-related issues, reflect their SDM/SPS process. Every health behavior has effects on oneself and on others (friends, classmates, parents, siblings, other relatives) that must be carefully separated, specified, and examined. Any given substance—cigarettes, chewing tobacco, beer, wine, hard liquor, pills, steroids, cocaine, crack, heroin, amphetamines, barbiturates, and so on—can be introduced and discussed using FIG TESPN as a framework. One way to open such a discussion is, "How do you feel when (or, would you feel if) someone asks you to try \_\_\_\_\_?" Different ways of thinking through the problem can be shared with the class or written down; possible consequences and obstacles of trying different solutions and plans can be tried out through guided practice and rehearsal.

A more general way of introducing such discussions with younger children is to ask, "How do you feel about . . . (e.g., cigarettes)?" "What problems do you see for people who smoke?" Then, goals can be set, alternatives to smoking discussed, and plans made. As part of the last step in FIG TESPN, students can be asked to make public commitments about not smoking, an effective public health technique. This can even extend to creating public service ads. FIG TESPN also is useful for discussing the related, delicate problem of what to do when a friend or loved one is involved in some form of substance abuse. This is a volatile issue, especially when a parent is involved.

Across all health-related FIG TESPN applications, key skills to emphasize include guiding oneself through clear goals and envisioning in detail a variety of outcomes or consequences. Conflicts between long-term and short-term goals need exploration.

Creating worksheets that look something like this can link actions, goals, and consequences.

If my goal is to \_\_\_\_\_, then some things that can help me get there and not hurt me or others are:

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For each goal, a "menu" or personal workbook can be created that students can review and have available to add to or look over for ideas throughout the year. Many times, teachers find it useful to provide a set of goals that are commonly implicit or hidden reasons that contribute to high-risk health behaviors, such as the following:

- To fit into a group
- To please one's friends
- To relieve "pressure"
- To imitate sports stars

With these goals placed in the format of the workbook, the idea of using risky health behaviors to reach these goals loses some of its plausibility and secrecy.

### An SEL-Based Format for Deepening Academic Understanding Through Action-Oriented Projects and Reports

Educators desire children to learn deeply. This requires children to have a sustained focus on a particular topic. In addition, there must be an active component that allows children to construct what they are learning and bring it into their lives. The process of doing projects and reports most commonly leads to deep learning. Key elements for success are the SEL skills needed for preparation, planning, and carrying out the many tasks that are involved. Projects require coordination of cognition, affect, behavior, and motivation; sequences of goal-directed action; and, often, teamwork, persistence, flexibility, and creativity. In the face of such task demands, students often invoke rote procedures geared toward getting finished.

The worksheet in Figure 7.4, Taming Tough Topics (cf. Elias & Clabby, 1989, pp. 157–158), recognizes that while topics usually are determined by the teacher, at times there should be some latitude concerning what aspects of the topics students explore. Further, students usually are channeled toward a standard written report format that many find unengaging. An excursion to an encyclopedia or CD-ROM for some copying can become an appealing way to get an assignment finished fast.

**Figure 7.4.** Taming Tough Topics outline.

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**First: Define your problem and goal.**

1. What is the topic?
2. What are some questions you would like to answer about the topic, or some things about the topic you would like to learn?

**Second: List alternative places to look for information.**

1. Write at least five possible places where you can look for information.
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Plan which ones you will try first.
3. If these ideas do not work, whom else can you ask for ideas? Where else can you look for information?

**Third: List alternative ways to present the topic.**

1. Write at least three ways in which to present the topic. If it is a written report, write three different ways it can be put together.
2. Consider the consequences for each way, choose your best solution, and plan how you will do it.

**Fourth: Make a final check, and fix what needs fixing.**

1. Does your presentation answer the topic and the questions you asked? Is it clear and neat? Is the spelling correct? Will others enjoy what you have done?
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Note: Reprinted with permission from Elias & Clabby, 1989, pp. 157–158.

Typically, teachers review the Taming Tough Topics worksheet with a group or an entire class, brainstorming answers to each question and writing them on the board. This engages students in a shared SDM/SPS process, which continues as they select their own preferences and then carefully plan and check their work before deciding whether their final product is complete.

When given choices and structure, students become more motivated to expend effort. One special education class in Middlesex Borough, New Jersey, used Taming Tough Topics as a framework for studying the topic, Indians of New Jersey. When asked, students indicated they wanted to learn more about what happened to the Indians, the sports they played, even the radio stations they listened to. The teacher accepted the students' questions, as they reflected genuine concerns that would serve to motivate the ensuing learning process. (Of course, this format also provides interesting diagnostic/assessment information to teachers about their students' state of thinking about a particular topic.) They generated places to look for information, including museums, sound filmstrips, and finding people of Indian ancestry. Their presentation formats ranged from a written interview with a Native American to a series of dioramas to a "period play"; older students also have created videos for other topics.

**Creating Student Action Groups.** The idea of organizing students as problem-solving teams using Taming Tough Topics is complementary to ongoing curricular initiatives, such as terrorism, world peace, school violence, cultural/ethnic stereotyping, prejudice, vandalism, poverty, education, toxic waste, social justice, race relations, future jobs, and the elderly (Crabbe, 1989; Kniep, 1986). It also links well with initiatives in service learning, such as Lions-Quest International's Skills for Action Program (cf. [www.Quest.edu](http://www.Quest.edu) for the most updated information about this curriculum). The latter is based on a process of organizing service learning experiences around the following activities: preparation (acquire background related to the recipients of the service), action (provide meaningful service with real consequences, based on appropriate social-emotional and academic skills), reflection (keep records of the experience, discuss thoughts and feelings, look at broader perspective), and demonstration (show others what one has done, learned, accomplished through service, perhaps including carrying out projects in the community). This sequence has clear parallels to both Taming Tough Topics and FIG TESP.

One example of such an application took place in Berkeley Heights, NJ. Sixth-grade students addressed local environmental problems with recycling. Plans they generated led the students to receive community-wide attention and recognition by the state legislature, culminating in a Presidential Environmental Award, complete with a White House ceremony (Johnsen & Bruene-Butler, 1993).



**Preparation for Inclusive Education.** For students in classes in which children with handicapping conditions will be included, a valuable project is to learn about the conditions of these children. In one situation, when a child diagnosed with autism was going to join a third-grade class, the class used *Taming Tough Topics* as a way to learn about autism. By the time the student was ready to enter the class, the class was ready for him. They had an understanding of autism and of how best to include their new classmate in activities and respond to him during difficult times (Epstein & Elias, 1996). Relatedly, some special education classes actually turn projects on their own disabilities into presentations to educate other members of the school community.

**Exploring How Role Models Attained Their Status.** Role models play a substantial part in students' learning. This can be capitalized on by having them write biographies. *Taming Tough Topics* can be an excellent vehicle for teaching students about the role of hard work, determination, commitment, and other character attributes and skills in the successes of the people they find admirable. Individuals can be selected from a wide range of backgrounds, including political figures, explorers, inventors, scientists, sports and entertainment figures, musical performers—the list is endless. Then, students use *Taming Tough Topics* to learn more about the person in areas of their interest. Such assignments bring to life the realities of success, as well as issues relating to certain historical periods and to diversity, depending on how a teacher chooses to construct the assignment. The main instructional goal is always kept in focus: building students' thinking abilities and SDM/SPS skills—essential for students to function effectively in a sophisticated, twenty-first century society.

#### MOVING TOWARD PRE-K TO GRADE 12 SEL IN URBAN SCHOOLS: INITIAL LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PLAINFIELD PROJECT

Perry London, writing in *Phi Delta Kappan*, articulated the need to integrate social-emotional and academic concerns:

For the common good, a sane society needs to educate its citizens in both civic virtue and personal adjustment. . . . The schools must become more important agents of character development, whose responsibility goes beyond such matters as dress, grooming, and manners. Their new role must include training for civility and civic virtue, as well as a measure of damage control for personal maladjustment. (London, 1987, p. 667)

As educators look toward the future, the challenge of bringing SDM/SPS and related approaches into urban schools looms large. In New Jersey, the focus is the 30 "Abbott" school districts, the locations where youth are at highest risk for problem behaviors and poor academic outcomes. Of particular concern is children's literacy, as students in urban Abbott districts have poor reading scores. In response, districts place a huge emphasis on improving reading, at times to the exclusion of much else. As the link of SEL and academics has grown stronger, there is a greater imperative for bringing SEL approaches into urban schools as an integral part of larger education reform and improvement of literacy skills. However, while SDM/SPS and related SEL programs have been widely implemented with effectiveness in suburban and rural settings, this has not been true in urban contexts. What follows are some learnings from a project designed to help fill some of our knowledge and practice gaps in this area.

As of this writing, I am in the latter stages of working directly with the Plainfield, NJ, school district as it embarks on a 7-year effort to bring SEL from pre-K to grade 12. These years have focused on bringing an SDM/SPS-based SEL curriculum to the elementary level and piloting infusion of SEL into character and health education at the middle and high school levels. In all cases, it has been necessary to simultaneously align SEL with the district's adoption of whole school reform models, especially (but not exclusively) America's Choice and its highly prescriptive approaches to literacy. This has created difficult conditions in which to engage in bringing in a systematic approach to SEL instruction. Yet, students cannot wait to begin focusing systematically on their SEL until academically oriented school reforms have been successfully implemented. Thus, two significant innovations must occur in tandem, something that will be the rule and not the exception in urban settings.

#### Reading and Emotion

Reading standards for grade 3 promulgated by the U.S. Department of Education show considerable overlap in the skills required for reading and the skills of SEL/emotional intelligence. This is particularly true in the area of reading comprehension, where impulse control, attention to sequence, focusing, and making careful, informed choices are part of both reading and assessment. Not emphasized, although it should be, is the issue of expanding children's feelings vocabulary, another area in which life and literacy skills converge.

Literacy performance also is related to the boundaries between home and school. Strong emotions in the home context have a profound impact

on how and what children learn. Stories that contain common referents—mother, father, sister, brother, home—can evoke surprisingly powerful emotional reactions in young readers. Once this charge is activated, many children lack the skills to put aside their feelings and continue with the task at hand. Observing reading instruction in urban schools, I have seen this happen repeatedly. I have even observed children taking assessments associated with our interventions who were so put off by a question about doing things with their fathers, when they had no contact with their fathers, that they were not able to complete the assessments in a reliable manner.

On the other hand, I also have seen techniques that provide emotional buffers between home and school, serving as mediators and allowing children to differentiate conditions at “home” and conditions at “school.” The active ingredients in the Responsive Classroom program, with its Morning Meetings and Greetings (Kriete, 1999), as well as the SDM/SPS Sharing Circle (Elias & Clabby, 1989), serve to create an emotional bridge that allows students to ease their way into the school environment as members of a safe community of learners.

### Instruction That Leads to Social-Emotional Skills and Their Application

For SEL skills to become salient to children, their acquisition and use must be clear, visible, and fully integrated into the school day. Instructional processes must be used that ensure that children will access and use SEL skills in reading, in other areas of academic instruction, and in everyday life decisions and contexts, particularly when under stress.

Much is known about how to teach skills and create environments in which those skills will become reinforced and generalized. It matches the instructional design used in the vast majority of empirically supported curriculum-based approaches to SEL. The core is “formal” or “structured” lessons that include these features: (1) identify a skill and create/discuss a rationale for its use in children’s lives, (2) model/teach components of the skill and their integration, (3) provide students with kid-tested activities for practice with feedback opportunities, (4) establish *prompts and cues* that refer to the behavioral components rehearsed in the lesson, and (5) ensure recognition/reinforcement for real-world skills application.

In Plainfield, an adaptation of the SDM/SPS curriculum was made around a fictional multiethnic set of characters working in a radio station. These characters, led by “TJ the DJ”—a wheelchair-bound African American teenager who handles the calls—help kids who call in to figure out how to solve their problems, prompting them to build their skills in the process. Vignettes presented in video and story-based formats (to build various types

of literacy skills) are followed by a series of SEL lessons designed to explicate, build, and reinforce the skills presented in the stories. Lessons have been developed through grade 5 (Rutgers Social and Emotional Learning Laboratory, 2002) and research studies have confirmed both positive outcomes of the program (Dilworth, Mokruue, & Elias, 2002) and the linkage of social competence skills to academic outcomes in our urban sample (Mitchell, 2003).

However, gains cannot be attributed to the formal lesson structure alone. Built into the instructional plan are external prompts, such as posters, cue cards, visual cues, and signals that are established between a teacher and students or groups of students to serve as reminders to use the skills presented in formal lessons. For example, in Plainfield’s program, TJ-related posters remain on the walls of the classroom throughout the school year as prompts for students to use the teamwork and conflict resolution skills that were introduced and practiced in formal lessons. In Martin Luther King School in Piscataway, NJ, a Keep Calm Force of students volunteer their services for a marking period and wear big, bright T-shirts on the playground (over their jackets in winter) with “Keep Calm Force” written in black letters. The goal is to interrupt potentially disruptive situations by showing up at recess quarrels as in vivo posters, thereby prompting emotional regulation and problem-solving thinking among the disputants. (Should this not be sufficient, the force members are trained in ways to get an adult quickly, which also serves many valuable functions.) The experience in Plainfield has illustrated clearly that curriculum-based approaches may be necessary but clearly are not sufficient for SEL skill acquisition with the strength needed to also affect academic functioning. For learning in academic subject areas to proceed effectively in the face of the powerful distractions found so commonly in low socioeconomic urban environments, children need structures and skills that will help them channel their energies and emotions into learning. Unless students are given strategies to regulate their emotions and direct their energies toward learning, it is unlikely that added instructional hours or days will eventuate in corresponding amounts of academic learning. Students need tools to self-monitor and regulate their emotions. Questions such as, “How do you know when you are upset?” and “What will you do in this class when you are distracted by your strong feelings, or when your feelings are about to ‘burst,’ or when you don’t understand what is being taught to you?” must become part of commonplace classroom conversation and climate. Prompts to use skills taught in formal lessons, advisories, or group guidance periods are essential stops along the road to internalization of skills, a road that is traveled over the course of years, not weeks or months.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Curriculum-based lessons provide structured opportunities for skill instruction and practice that then can combine with students' self-monitoring of their own skill development, and ongoing external prompts by adults to promote skill use. These skills also must be integrated into everyday academic instruction if generalization is to be maximized. Clearly, our understanding of what a curriculum or program does and how it works to build "individual" skills has become much more sophisticated. The broader classroom and school context—including parents, bus drivers, community sports coaches, for example—must reinforce the use of skills. The combination of these elements yields positive student outcomes and significant behavior change.

The SDM/SPS approach, like many related approaches identified as exemplary SEL curricula by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2003; Cohen, 1999; Elias et al., 1997; Payton et al., 2000), builds competence and confidence. A basic set of skills is taught explicitly, but for generalization, it is essential to regularly make applications to social and academic aspects of school learning and life. SDM/SPS skills foster clarity amid many competing influences on a student's heart and mind. They help form the basis of coping skills and strategies that students must possess because one cannot prepare children for every problem they will face and all the ways in which problems might occur.

In that sense, SDM/SPS and related approaches serve as beacons in a fog or as lifelines when one is overboard at sea. This has been amply demonstrated in schools' use of SDM/SPS in response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath. But like a beacon, the light must shine continuously. And lifelines, once proffered, should not be pulled in. There is never a time when SEL instruction stops and the assumption is made that children have seen enough light or grabbed enough rope so they can navigate themselves to safety. They must be explicitly guided all the way, until high school graduation.

Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving, and the many related approaches discussed here and elsewhere, provide tools for all educators to decisively confront the task of how, not whether, to enhance children's social-emotional competencies and life skills and how to do so in a way that simultaneously lifts all students' academic potential.

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## CHAPTER 8

## Social Development and Social and Emotional Learning

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This chapter explores the contribution of a social developmental perspective to the understanding and design of social and emotional learning programs, and illustrates this approach through the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), a universal preventive intervention delivered in elementary schools.

A social developmental perspective focuses on the importance of creating the conditions that lead youths to develop strong bonds to family, school, and community. The social development model (SDM) suggests that these bonds are created through providing children with opportunities for involvement with prosocial peers and adults, ensuring they have the skills to participate effectively, and recognizing and rewarding them for this involvement. A social developmental perspective suggests that social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions should include elements designed to increase opportunities for children to be involved in prosocial activities and to be effectively rewarded for that participation, in addition to teaching social and emotional competence.

We begin with an overview of social developmental theory and the social development model. Next we discuss why the goals behind social and emotional learning are likely to be more fully realized when skills-training interventions are provided in the context of opportunities and rewards for prosocial involvement. This is followed by examples of effective program components and interventions from elementary through high school that illustrate the implications of the social development model for SEL interventions. We then examine the SSDP, a school-based intervention grounded in the social development model that has durable effects on a wide range of

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