

What Do You Teach?

Social and emotional learning, teaching the heart as well as the brain



“WHAT DO YOU DO FOR A LIVING?”

“I am a teacher.”

“Oh! What do you teach?”

This is a more complicated question than most people realize. I have provided instruction on many things including, but not limited to, literacy, mathematics, science, geography, vocational training, community skills, occupational therapy, speech, art, music, languages, etc. Those are only subjects though, and they change depending on where I am teaching. What never changes is the fact that I teach students—*that* is what I teach.

Traditionally, educators are charged with providing rigorous academic instruction in order to maximize subject-based performance for all students. This is what we measure with assessments and chart on our data trackers during a student’s educational career. What we do not measure in our pupils nor ask of our teachers is how they will instruct and account for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in their classrooms. It is not a required course credit to earn most diplomas, so how can we concern ourselves with, or even justify, dedicating instructional minutes to it?

The answer is because I do not just teach literacy from 9am-10am and assume a child does not need me for the next 15-minute break. Teachers do not stop teaching when we are on the playground for duty or at lunch or on school trips. The reason for it has nothing to do with professional eagerness or a desire to get ahead in our careers.

The reason is not only do I have

to have answers for questions about punctuation and perimeters, but I also have to have an answer when the child who was picked last for the dodgeball game feels left out. I have to have an answer for the student who asks me if he did something wrong since his parents are getting a divorce. I even have to have an answer for the pain-taking silence coming from the girl who just moved here from another country.

The girl picked last is struggling immensely in mathematics in spite of her aptitude for it. She does not have the coping skills she needs to work effectively during group activities. She feels isolated, alone and depressed. Playground rules might ensure she is a team player, but they do not prepare her for the rules of networking she will encounter in her adult life. She will need fortitude, the ability to advocate for herself, and fearlessness to overcome the challenge. There are no standards to measure these.

The boy in the middle of the divorce used to be the class clown with his boisterous, playful demeanor. Now he never raises his hand and sits by himself at lunch. He is on-target, but he should be well ahead with his gifted mind. He has developed a healthy fear of failure. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” for most of us, but for him, “nothing ventured, so I can’t be a disappointment to anyone.” He needs tenacity, a sense of self-worth, and the ability to forgive himself and others to overcome the challenge. There are no standards to measure these.

The girl who just moved here never turns in homework, never wants to

go on school trips, and never goes to birthday parties or sleepovers. She is struggling in all subjects, and the other students describe her as a little mean. She is angry because she was happy where she was before. She does not have the skills she needs to adjust when life simply is not fair. She needs resilience, adaptability and positive psychology to overcome the challenge. There are no standards to measure these.

I have to have an answer so I can reach them. And by an “answer,” I do not mean a vague blanket statement of comfort. When I say “answer,” I mean concrete activities a child can employ in order to process their emotions, the emotions of others, and their choices. Concrete *skills*.

When students feel disconnected, they detach from a school’s social network as well as their learning. Multiple studies have proven when a student is in emotional distress, their academic performance can decline significantly. Inversely, a study from Loyola University Chicago demonstrated that students who received explicit instruction in SEL at schools showed an 11 percent increase in academic achievement. I know that is just a number, but imagine an 11 percent increase in your salary, in the size of your house, and even your time off. Now think about that 11 percent in schools. SEL programs are vital to the future of education.

The world is most certainly a smaller place, and all we have to do is turn on the news to know that even as adults we can still be at a loss for words or actions in the wake of tragedy. As educators, we must ensure the next generation is academically prepared, but we must also take care to teach not only the skills they need to pick themselves back up when they fall, but also empathy to help the person next to them when *they* do. Going back to the original question: What do I teach? I teach intellectual and emotional nourishment. I teach kindness, courage and relentlessness. I teach *people*, hopefully, to follow their hearts for the benefit of their minds. ■



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