

The Critical Role of Social-Emotional Learning in Building Resilience within School Communities

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Abstract

Resilience is critical, but particularly so in the face of uncertainty and change in a global pandemic. Resilient communities need to anticipate the social-emotional needs of their students, as social-emotional learning plays a critical role in building resilience. A study of peer-reviewed literature reveals that the strengths of the community at large can increase social-emotional skills; thereby, providing both youth and adults an avenue in which stability can grow. Social-emotional learning highlights five areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). When communities are characterized by these five competencies, students grow in understanding and application to become resilient community members. By fostering healthy relationships, adults can mentor students to manage stress positively and increase a sense of self-efficacy and control. Productive partnerships among community stakeholders and educational communities will produce tools for increasing capacity for resilience, as training and coaching are essential to thriving communities.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, resilience, relationships, students, community

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Educators' conversations often center around how to develop healthy, functioning students. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory examines the inter-relationship of different contexts that influence youth development by illustrating how the contexts, or "systems" at play in a child's life, can affect and are affected by the others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Educational institutions provide a hub for building positive assets in youth that will help them develop psychologically, socially, and emotionally. The school system, however, cannot do it alone. Community stakeholders (families, businesses, organizations, etc.) who collaborate and contribute to the development of stable, resilient students will increase their community's capacity to compete in the 21st-century workforce. With the unprecedented impact of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, community stakeholders must be intuitive, responsive, and flexible to determine how to best support students and their families. The purpose of this paper is to examine how social-emotional skills build resilience in youth, how healthy adult-youth relationships influence youth development, and how community assets can and should support this effort.

The Need

The impact of large-scale, societal disruptions on educational communities must be considered when working to recover a sense of stability. The pandemic has caused communities to reconsider how to provide appropriate structures, supportive relationships, space for belonging, positive social norms, opportunities to make a difference, and ways to build skills for students because physical and psychological safety are almost constantly at risk in the current climate (see figure 1). Adults must ensure that young people are surrounded by a variety of supports and have access to positive people and programs, so they **experience positive outcomes**.

Figure 1*Understanding Positive Youth Development*

Note. Disruption of access to support impact youth development. Adapted from "The 5 C's of Positive Youth Development" by ICAN: Positive Youth Programs, 2018, (<http://icanaz.org/the-5cs-of-positive-youth-development>). Copyright 2018 by ICAN: Positive Youth Programs. Creative Commons License.

While providing positive support for youth may require creativity in the current context, the foundations remain the same. Luthar, Cichetti, and Becker (2000) studied the need for adults to be able to engage with the dynamic process of disruption and reintegration to adapt positively despite adversity. Knowing that adults can cope and adapt by using tools that increase resilience and develop their social-emotional skills will, thereby, better position community members to help students process and grow through the unknowns that lie ahead. As children observe how adults react to experiences, they learn about the safety or danger of their environments (Campos, 1981).

A Time for Social-Emotional Learning

Key tools for preventing long-term adverse childhood experiences include **social-emotional skills** and involve **equipping the community** to provide **healthy adult-student relationships**. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (n.d.) describes **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)** as "a framework that

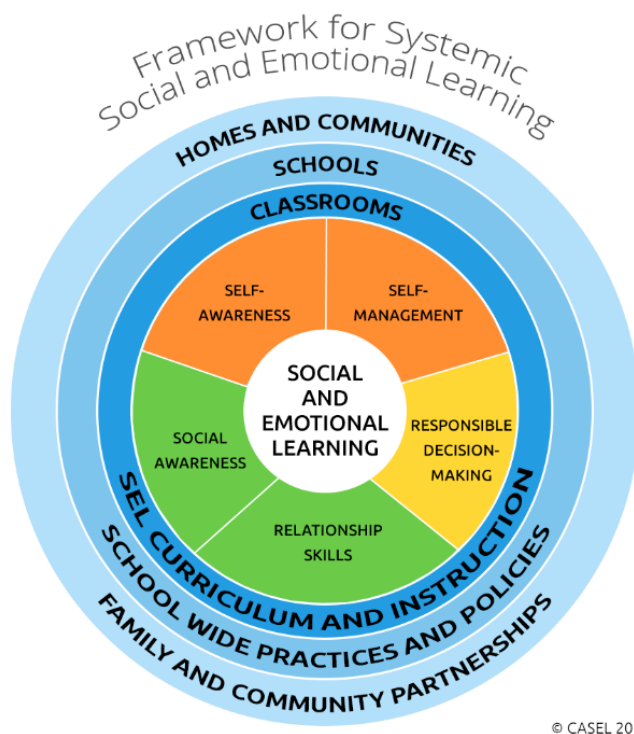
focuses on the core social and emotional skills necessary for students of all ages to be healthy and successful.” The framework establishes the process through which students acquire the **knowledge**, **attitudes**, and **skills** necessary to identify and manage **emotions**, set and achieve **positive goals**, feel and show **empathy** for others, establish and maintain **positive relationships**, and make **responsible decisions** (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, et al., 2011).

SEL addresses five key areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.) (see Figure 2). **Self-awareness** involves identifying and assessing one’s feelings, strengths, limitations, values, and emotions to understand their influence on behavior (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). Self-awareness, the foundation of emotional intelligence, provides a base for which one can make decisions and build relationships effectively. **Self-management** is the ability to regulate one’s emotions to manage stress, control impulses, increase motivation, persevere in overcoming obstacles, and setting and achieving personal and academic goals (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). **Social awareness** involves understanding, empathizing, and respecting others no matter their background or culture. Evidence of this skill requires one to recognize when social support—like family, school, and community resources—is necessary and to use the supports when needed. **Relationship skills** are the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs. Individuals strong in this skill communicate clearly and effectively, practice active listening, engage in healthy conflict while avoiding unhealthy conflict, and seek and provide help when needed (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). **Responsible decision making** is the ability to make productive and respectful choices considering personal and ethical responsibility. This skill complements relationship skills as individuals can navigate interpersonal and intrapersonal contexts appropriately.

The positive outcomes associated with SEL skills affect the areas of attitude, behavior, academic performance, college and career preparedness, resilience, and improved physical health. Considering that students currently must deal with large-scale disruption, the following outcomes of SEL which include reduced emotional distress, fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal **empower those working with students to equip them to navigate uncertainty** (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, et al., 2011; Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2004).

Figure 2

Social & Emotional Learning Core Competencies



Note. The core competencies provide a foundation for how adults in the community can create healthy relationships with students. From “What is SEL?” by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), (n.d.) (<https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>). Copyright by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

Healthy Relationships

Researchers have established that **resilience can increase** through learning and implementing mechanisms regularly. Alvord and Grados (2005) define resilience as “those skills, attributes, and abilities that enable individuals to **adapt to hardships, difficulties, and challenges**” (p. 238). An impactful mechanism for increasing resilience in youth is through building **healthy adult-youth**

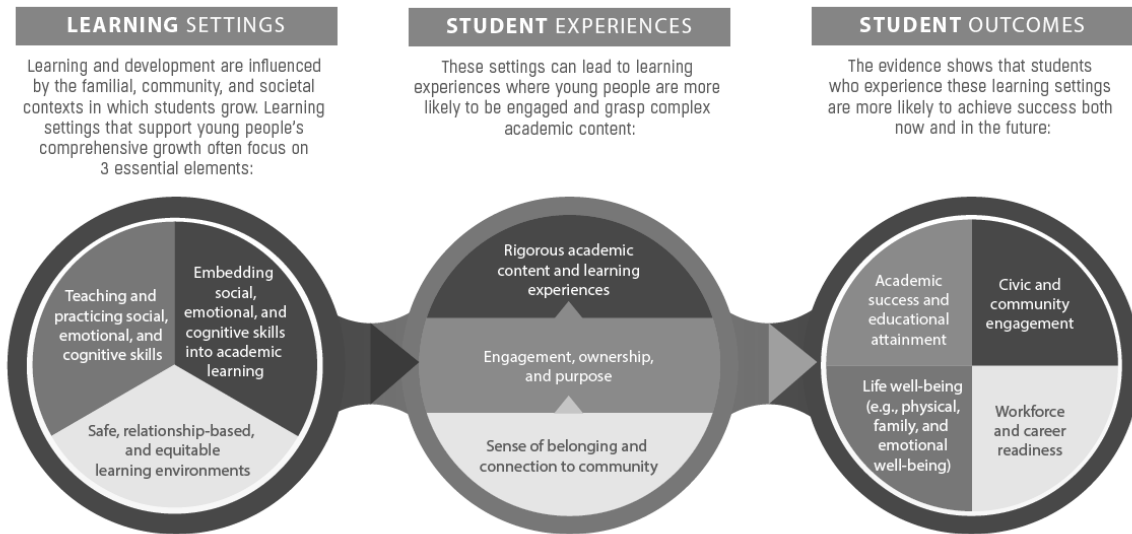
relationships. This reality places a heavy responsibility on the adults in education communities to create empathetic, safe relationships with students to explore emotions and identify coping tools for dealing with emotions. Another mechanism for developing resilience is to teach students to **manage stress positively** through coping skills that will allow them to navigate obstacles and hardships. Other mechanisms include scaffolding learning so that students **build a sense of self-efficacy and control** (Center on the Developing Child, 2015).

Long-term, mutual benefit exists in **creating environments** that encourage the growth of healthy, productive relationships that connect adults and youth and bring them together as a whole to help build resilience. When youth development leaders, district leaders, and school leaders foster physically and emotionally safe learning environments that are child-and-youth centered, a culture of resilience, respect, and equitable service for all can be developed (Berger et al., 2018). The successful navigation of persistent unknowns by students depends on their connection and access to adults in the community (see Figure 3). Bringing youth together again to learn and to interact safely is essential to increasing resilience.

Figure 3

Relationships Impact Student Development

What This Looks Like in Schools and Communities

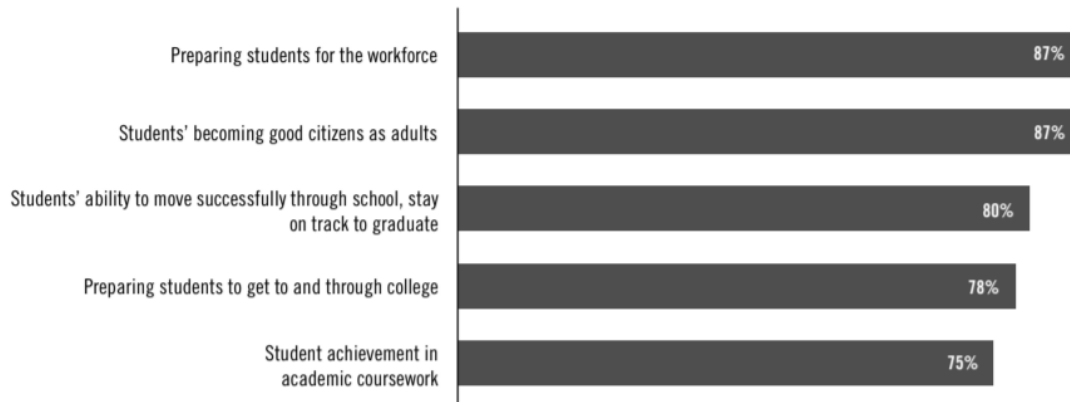


Note. Healthy communities include healthy relationships for adults and students alike. Adapted from “National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: A Practice Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens” by R. Berger, S. Berman, J. Garcia, and J. Deasy, 2018, *Nation at Hope*, p. 5 (http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/aspen_practice_final_web_optimized.pdf) Creative Commons License.

The literature overwhelmingly supports implementing specific SEL training to produce positive outcomes in students and the community. According to a national teacher survey, teachers and employers believe that SEL skills can be taught and this should be an integral part of the in-school experience (see Figure 4). Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, et al. (2011) researched 213 school-based SEL programs involving over 270,000 students and found that SEL participants demonstrated significant improvement in social and emotional skills, attitudes and behaviors, and academic performance. Data indicates that targeted social-emotional school programs yield positive effects.

Figure 4*Teacher Belief*

Larger focus on social and emotional learning would have a major benefit on this:



Note. Teachers believe a greater emphasis on social and emotional learning would have major career, school, and life benefits. Adapted from “The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools” by J. Bridgeland, M. Bruce, and A. Hariharan, 2013, *A Report for CASEL*, p. 29 (<http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/the-missing-piece.pdf>). Copyright 2013 by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

Community Impact

Evidence also suggests that social and emotional learning is more powerful when it is **reinforced in all areas of context** for youth development (Greenberg et al., 2003). CASEL and others believe that for programs to be most effective, they should include a systematic approach that entails **integrating SEL across school activities and reach into the community**. When schools support high-quality implementation, the impact of the SEL program is significantly strengthened (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, et al., 2011). A classic 30-year study by Werner and Smith tracing a group of Hawaiian children into adulthood indicated that the most resilient adults in the study were those with the largest network of adults, related or not, who supported them throughout childhood (Benson, 1998). The fact that **communities can work together** in supporting student development of social-emotional skills that increase resilience is a **cause for great hope** despite global and social unknowns.

Productive Partnerships

Understanding how healthy, productive relationships can develop social-emotional competencies among students and the faculty and staff within educational institutions frames much of Clemson University ThinkShops™ work around resilient school communities. This work is informed by (a) the synthesis of a wide variety of literature on effective communication, emotional intelligence, healthy relationships, resilience, and social-emotional learning; (b) analysis of evidence-based practices; and (c) applied research through partnerships with other state agencies.

The solution to **recovery from large-scale disruption lies in the holistic approach** as recommended by the literature. ThinkShops believes in this approach and strives to integrate SEL workshops and programming across educational institutions and into society.

“Life is full of challenges – stresses and risks, both major and minor. Facing such challenges is part of growing up. Neither society nor parents can completely protect children from them, and it is, after all, the children and youth who themselves have to meet these challenges. However, we can prepare them to overcome adversities in life and furthermore to thrive. By identifying important developmental strengths such as character strengths and life satisfaction, by facilitating their development, and by strengthening and maintaining them we can help youth achieve the healthy, happy, and good lives that they all deserve” (Park, 2004, p. 51).

Implementation of training that integrates educators with community stakeholders allows for a **common language** to be established, whereby **productive communication** along with **mutual commitment** and **consistency** is achieved. Research-based training and coaching establish that common language. We provide both youth and adult learners tools for increasing personal resilience and developing individual assets. Through training, community members are properly equipped to meet individual social-emotional needs and build impactful adult-student relationships (see figure 5).

Figure 5*Solutions for Implementation*

Note. ThinkShops™ aims to assist its community.

The unique structure of ThinkShops allows us to provide a highly qualified team of specialists who possess the experience and expertise necessary to ensure successful partnerships and lasting impact. In fulfillment of Clemson University's land grant mission, ThinkShops aims to assist others in **building human capacity.**

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