Mentoring for Social and Emotional Learning

What do we truly believe about our students? That some are hardworking, motivated and intelligent, while others are lazy, could care less, and not too bright—or somewhere in between? For a number of years, adjectives like gifted and talented, average, at-risk, or learning disabled have been used to describe and categorize students. These descriptors have served to explain, excuse, and justify student success or failure, often affixing labels to students that can haunt them for the rest of their educational, even personal lives.

Yet how do these labels explain the fact that a student can behave one way in one classroom and become a different person in another? Most of us can remember a teacher who made a critical difference in our life—kindling and nurturing the curiosity that all humans are born with, connecting with us on a personal level, and believing in us when we weren’t even sure we could learn. It is clear that a teacher has a profound effect on a student’s success, for better or for worse.

Research makes a compelling case that social and emotional factors have the strongest impact on academic learning, affecting motivation and commitment, behaviors (i.e., attendance, connection with school, substance abuse, violence), and performance. Explicitly addressing these components of learning can change how much and how well students thrive.

Most mentors have a sense of the role that social and emotional learning plays in the effectiveness of both themselves and the teachers they support. This practice brief shares some learning from the collaboration of New Teacher Center (NTC) and Acknowledge Alliance (formerly the Cleo Eulau Center). It is intended to provide a model that offers conceptual frames, strategies, and tools that can be useful for mentors focused on helping teachers develop their understanding and application of social and emotional learning. An important outcome of this collaboration was to establish the link between building the social and emotional learning for school leaders and mentors to support teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

What is Social and Emotional Learning? Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) includes fundamental skills needed to build resilient relationships, social and emotional competence, and a positive classroom and school community. It is the foundation for learning, growth, and achievement. The development of SEL skills and competence is a parallel process for students, teachers, mentors, and administrators.
There are four key components of SEL that support teaching and learning:

1. **Emotional Competence:**
   Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one’s goals. It encompasses awareness and reflection:
   - Having compassion for self and others, demonstrating non-judgmental, non-reactive behavior, identifying and understanding one’s reactions to stress
   - Choosing when and how to react by pausing between stimulus and response
   - Developing a sense of positive identity
   - Using humor to diffuse a difficult situation

2. **Building Resilient Relationships:**
   - Cultivating empathy, seeing the world as another sees it
   - Setting healthy boundaries
   - Focusing on capabilities as well as gaps in self and others
   - Listening without judgment to demonstrate understanding
   - Developing mindfulness: awareness of one’s experience

3. **Developing a Positive Classroom and School Community:**
   - Engaging all students in the subject being taught
   - Helping students establish intrinsic goals and a sense of empowerment toward academic achievement
   - Creating an atmosphere of safety; mistakes are an opportunity to learn
   - Demonstrating that each student can be successful
   - Promoting respect and understanding across cultures, race, class, language, sexual identity, and other differences
   - Teaching students to value and support one another
   - Providing opportunities for meaningful contribution for all
   - Clearly defining rules, procedures, and norms

4. **Developing Social Competence:**
   - Nurturing positive peer relationships
   - Teaching conflict resolution skills, being assertive instead of aggressive in communicating needs, and considering a variety of ways to respond to problems and power struggles
   - Creating autonomy, accessing resources, advocating for emotional survival and academic needs to be met

While these components can seem overwhelming, there are language, protocols, and tools to support mentors as they work with beginning teachers.

**Mentors Develop Their Own SEL**

In order for mentors to support SEL in beginning teachers, they must be aware of their own emotions and attend to their own social and emotional learning. Just as mentors learn coaching language, reflective questions can assist them in assessing their own emotional status and competence.

**Jenny, a mentor, has noticed that she is beginning to dread her meetings with Mark, a beginning teacher. She finds his attitude negative and complaining.**

There is internal language (questions) that can promote self-reflection:

- *If I were this person, what might I be feeling?*
- *Am I frustrated?*
- *Am I willing to listen and be open?*
- *What does my body language show?*

This quick self-assessment can provide time to identify and adjust a mentor’s own reactions and emotional responses. Mentors can use professional development time (i.e., Mentor Forums) to ask themselves such questions individually, in order to understand their own challenges and feelings, then meet with a peer coach to problem solve and decide on next steps. Mentors also can share these questions with their beginning teachers to help them become aware of similar feelings and responses they may have toward different students.

Using a case study can help mentors access prior experience to address their individual challenges and how to overcome them. Mentors can consider a situation where they felt ineffective. Some possible indicators include frustration, impatience, boredom, dread, hopelessness, anger, and difficulty in creative problem solving. After identifying the indicator that applies in each situation, a mentor can describe why it makes it difficult for Jenny, the case study teacher to feel empathy, and how she might overcome her roadblocks. By tapping into prior experiences, mentors can make applications to their case.
Mentoring for SEL—Empathy and Resilience

Jenny meets with Mark, her beginning teacher. Mark has frequently remarked on how little his students seem to be interested in learning and how their parents don’t seem to care. She is beginning to doubt her effectiveness as a mentor. Jenny is finding that she is lacking empathy and her resilience is faltering.

Empathy can be defined as the ability to put oneself in another’s position and see the world as they see it. Within this stance, a person can think of many explanations for another’s behavior and brainstorm alternative ways to take action or respond to a comment.

Resilience is a person’s ability to bounce back from adversity. There are both internal and external factors that impact a person’s resilience. For mentors and beginning teachers, learning to recognize and positively affect one’s own resilience can make a big difference in the lives of their students, colleagues, and their own.

There are sentence stems and questions that promote reflective listening and empathy:

- It must be really difficult when…
- I wonder if there is a different way to look at this?
- The main issue seems to be…Do I understand this correctly?

This language can demonstrate a mentor’s empathy and develop that of the teacher’s. A rule of thumb is not to jump in until the person has had a chance to offer further information about the situation or their feelings. Paraphrasing and clarifying questions build the trust necessary to address sensitive or difficult topics. Aligned with mentor language that has been found to be effective in supporting a beginning teacher’s reflective thinking and building efficacy to resolve their own challenges, language that communicates empathy and social and emotional learning models and reinforces the impact on teachers and their students.

Observation Cycle for SEL

A mentor may have an intuitive sense that there is a safe and nurturing classroom environment upon first entering. New teachers, while they have often taken pre-service courses in classroom management, can lack the experience and deep understanding of what actually has to be in place and how to build a culture of respect and safety where all students feel valued and optimal learning can occur. Mentors can have questions about key components of such a classroom, and what kind of SEL evidence can be collected during a classroom observation. SEL can be evident in the curriculum, classroom organization, teacher-student, and student-student interaction. In conjunction with Knowledge Alliance, NTC has developed a toolkit of observation tools and conversation protocols that can be useful in mentoring for SEL.

Paralleling the observation cycle, mentors can meet with a beginning teacher for a pre-observation planning conversation prior to collecting data. The conversation can begin by exploring aspects of SEL addressed in the lesson such as the textbook and other resources to be used and what social skills will support students as they work together or take academic risks. By discussing the teacher’s knowledge about the students, a mentor can ask questions that guide a teacher taking it into consideration while lesson planning. A logical follow-up to this could be co-planning a lesson that develops multiple perspectives. The mentor can share the observation tool and collaborate with the beginning teacher in selecting areas for the observation focus.

The Observation Tool for Social and Emotional Learning structures the data collection.

It consists of six focus areas:

1. **Empathy**
2. Healthy boundaries and limit setting
3. Acceptance, setting goals, and reinforcing competencies
4. Active and reflective listening
5. Social and cultural competence
6. Value and appreciation
For each of these, there are descriptors that clarify what an observer might see in each area such as: Offers positive, specific, non-judgmental feedback, in the area of Acceptance, setting goals, and reinforcing competencies. The observer gathers data of teacher and student actions and words.

Following the observation, the Post-Observation Protocol guides a conversation about the data the mentor collects. It begins with confirming the SEL focus for the observation, then an opportunity for the teacher to summarize his/her impressions of the lesson. After examining and analyzing the data, together mentor and beginning teacher synthesize learning, draw conclusions, and set next steps. As always, the conversation can conclude with reflecting on the process and suggesting possible refinements.

Another strategy could have mentors and beginning teachers select an observation focus, together visit a classroom of a teacher who is successfully implementing SEL to collect observation data, and meet afterward to discuss applications.

These strategies can support beginning teachers in becoming autonomous in directing their growth in SEL.

**SELSel and Cultural Competence**

Nationwide, 53 percent of Hispanic students, 55 percent of African American students (49 percent of African American males) graduate, compared with 78 percent of White students and 76 percent of Asian students. Many African American male students report that they sense their teachers are afraid of them. These facts are evidence of the importance of explicitly addressing social and emotional learning. By supporting new teachers in building safe, respectful and engaging learning environments, mentors can make a significant difference.

In our increasingly diverse country, the differences in race, class and culture can prove a challenge to many educators, not only beginning teachers. Many are faced with situations where emotional factors come into play because of individual and cultural history or a relationship to an issue. When mentors support new teachers who come from different racial or cultural backgrounds from themselves or the students they teach, it is helpful for them to assess their own social and emotional state.

**SEL and Common Core State Standards (CCSS)**

In addition to learning the content, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) requires students to be proficient in SEL skills and social and emotional competences. For example, CCSS Mathematical Practices—1 requires students to: Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them, reason abstractly and quantitatively, construct viable arguments, and critique the reasoning of others. To do so, they must be able to work respectfully with others, think critically, feel safe to take risks in problem solving, give and receive peer feedback, and be resilient. These SEL proficiencies are proven to correlate with all aspects of student success.

For new teachers, CCSS can seem like one more thing to add to their already full plate, so mentors can use the SEL conversation protocols and observation tool to gather data about both SEL and CCSS and make explicit their natural integration.

For those identifying with a culture that has been the target of racism, when working with someone from the dominant culture, a valuable question to consider could be:

- What steps would I need to take to become open to cultivating empathy?
If a mentor is working with a beginning teacher of students from different backgrounds, there are many opportunities to address cultural competence. Mentors can help beginning teachers find multiple resources of primary texts and teaching strategies, and assist them in preparing lessons that include different cultural experiences and perspectives. Pointing out how this connects to CCSS will help the beginning teacher internalize cultural competence as a habit of mind. Mentors can prepare beginning teachers for any potentially sensitive discussions or questions that might arise. Mentors can support beginning teachers as they ask themselves the questions that may help them better understand barriers to their own cultural competence in order to grow. There are invaluable resources that can be used to build the mentor’s awareness and provide culturally relevant teaching strategies.

**Conclusion**

For schools to be successful, SEL must be in the forefront on all levels—leadership, teachers, colleagues, and students. Teachers play a vital role in creating environments where optimal learning can happen for all. Mentors of new teachers can support novice teachers in deepening their understanding and increasing their skills in this realm. Dr. Ed Dunkelblau, Director of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning sees it as foundational for all teaching and learning: Social-emotional learning is not something else on your plate. It is the plate.

**INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

1. What strategies does your induction program use to build the knowledge and understanding of the components and impact of social and emotional learning for mentors and beginning teachers?
2. How does your program support mentors in assessing their own empathy and resilience?
3. What processes and protocols are in place for mentors to build their empathy and resilience?
4. What strategies do mentors use to support beginning teachers in assessing and increasing their own empathy and resilience?
5. How are mentors explicitly connecting Common Core State Standards and Social and Emotional Learning?
6. What strategies do mentors use to support beginning teachers in creating and sustaining classrooms where all students are engaged, respected and safe?
7. How do your mentors assess their own level of cultural competence?
8. How do your mentors support beginning teachers in developing culturally responsive teaching strategies?
9. How can your program improve support for mentors and beginning teachers in Social and Emotional Learning?

**Research/Bibliography**


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SEL and Academics Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
In a recent mentoring conversation with Anna, a first year teacher, I drew upon SEL competencies to work on a range of issues related to judgment. We were in the midst of a challenging time. Anna was experiencing some conflict with colleagues, received a negative evaluation, and was confronted by health issues. These stressors spilled out into her classroom, straining her relationships with students.

Our conversation opened with Anna sharing an interaction she had in the office with one of her students, Emily. Emily was looking at a testing data chart and made a comment about how some students weren’t very smart. Anna told Emily she was being rude and asked how she would feel if someone said that about her. Emily reacted defensively and Anna couldn’t understand why. I knew Anna’s underlying intent was to stop one student from speaking negatively about other students. However, as soon as Anna labeled Emily’s behavior as “rude,” Emily reacted in anger.

In Anna’s story I heard judgment—judgment by Emily of her peers, and also judgment from Anna, by labeling Emily’s behavior as rude. Anna’s tone of voice expressed annoyance, and she was frustrated by Emily’s reaction. But Anna also cared about how to effectively reach students and interact with them. She wanted to engage with this challenge, and she was having trouble understanding how her judgment may have affected Emily.

To keep the topic approachable, I took a friendly stance. “I’d like to share with you about my work as a mentor. I do the best I can to share opinions with you that are not couched in judgment.” I offered a few examples of comments I could make about her work that were judgmental and some that were not. Then I highlighted what Anna said to Emily, and offered a way of speaking to Emily without calling her “rude.” “Do you hear the difference?”

My mentee was quiet, focusing inward. Tears began to roll down her cheeks. As I reflected, I recognized the importance of maintaining positive regard and holding the silence. “Yes, I do hear it. You are one person I work with who doesn’t judge me. The judgmental language hurts. I can see that I am doing that with my students. I am judging them and showing my frustration as well. I’m also judging myself. I don’t like the person I’ve become and I can imagine that the way I speak to my students is having an impact on our relationships. I want to be a different teacher with them.”

My next step was to facilitate collaboration and to problem solve. I invited my mentee to share some of the judgmental comments she made recently. We made a “T” chart. On one side, we wrote down the comment; on the other, we came up with ways to speak honestly and without judgment. In some cases, we chose silence.

My mentee’s face lit up. This small step was possible. Together, we created an inroad for her to have greater social integrity with students. I encouraged her to be accepting of herself. Change doesn’t happen overnight. “At the end of every day, take a moment to write down one or two comments that you could have said differently, and then rephrase them, just like we are doing here.” I also suggested she practice pausing and rephrasing in the moment, actively changing what she would say to students so her words were aligned with her intentions.

This simple ritual of re-crafting comments led to changes in Anna’s engagement with her students. Sometimes she said things that she didn’t feel good about. But each day she reflected and came up with ideas about how she would interact with students differently.

A testament to Anna’s commitment to being intentional about her language came during a particularly stressful week. Everything that could go wrong was going wrong in Anna’s personal life. In the midst of this storm, a student validated her efforts in a subtle, but powerful way. “You know, you seem really happy lately. You’ve been nicer to us and more positive and I like being in your class.”

—Alison Kreider, New Teacher Center, Associate Program Consultant