



Is it important to Teach Socio-Emotional Skills in Schools?

From Teaching Skills to Socio-Emotional Support

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In developing the ideas to be presented I benefited greatly from the contributions of Noam Yitshaki, Yael Geifman, Karen Tal, and Ohad Ezra.

Talk Main Points:

1. Suggest that presently, there is **not enough evidence** showing that **direct systematic instruction of socio-emotional (SE) skills to students by (main) teachers is beneficial** - in the absence of more **basic motivational supports from teachers**
2. Explain the concept of **Practices providing Basic Motivational Supports** & present a model **integrating it with SE instruction.**
3. Suggest possible **implications for priorities of the ministry of education**, Shefi, & teacher education.
4. Two questions for further thinking today & beyond.

Two Main Components of Exemplary SEL Programs:

1. **Direct SE instruction:**

Systematic instruction of SE skills to students by (main) teachers as part of a curriculum.



2. **Basic Motivational Supports:**

Teacher & school practices that nurture students' basic psychological needs, learning and pro-social motivation, positive self-views, and sense of having an authentic inner compass
- not by direct SE instruction.



Explaining the Concept of Basic Motivational Supports

Not Employing Direct SE Instruction

Practices supporting students' basic psychological needs for:

**1. Relatedness,
Safety, belonging**



2. Competence

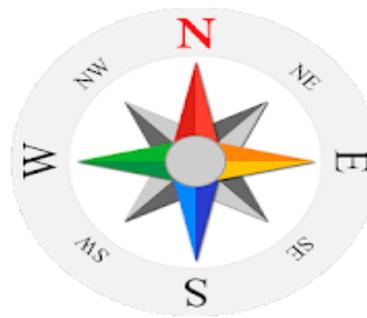


3. Autonomy

Freedom from coercion



Know what is important to me



Basic Motivation Practices

Not Using Systematic SE Instruction

I. Relatedness, Safety, and belonging:

1. Know, listen, show interest, devote time & show caring to each student.
2. Prevent use of exclusion & shaming as tools for maintaining social status, prevent violence.
3. Establish class routines & norms that increase caring & collaboration among students, and create a culture & value orientation of caring (e.g., sharing circles).
4. Make space for all students to participate in discussions, have roles, & show their strengths



Basic Motivation Practices

Not Using Systematic SE Instruction

Competence:

1. Set optimal challenges to each student, based on assessment & talk with child.
2. Set clear intermediate achievable goals (Shunck)
3. Timely, task-specific, non-comparative, feedback.
4. Help coping with failure by constructive (incremental) interpretations (Dweck), process focus, & relevant strategy learning (Zimmerman).
5. Messages & activities promoting class culture focusing on ability improvement; not on ability demonstration, hence reducing shame & avoidance of help-seeking.



Basic Motivation Practices

Not Using Systematic SE Instruction

Autonomy-Freedom to self direct, freedom from coercion, & Nurturing inner compass:



1. **Attempt to understand students' perspectives**

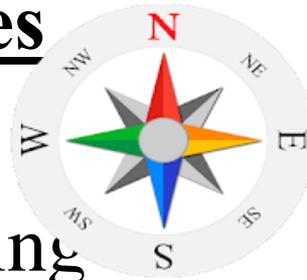
& feelings also **when resisting**; Allow criticism

2. Promote learning, respect for rules, & self-guiding

values & intrinsic interests (authentic Inner Compass) by:

- Providing **rationale & modeling, fostering reflection, initiative, choice &** formation of individual interests.

- **Not relying on** threats, shame, **conditional positive regard, ego-involving competitions & comparisons to others**; not interfering with the child's natural rhythm.



Evidence for the benefits of practices providing basic motivation supports comes from many studies based on important theoretical perspectives:

Attachment (Pianta), Self efficacy (Bandura, Schunk, Zimmerman); Goal theories (Nichols, Elliot, Dweck); Self determination theory (Ryan & Deci, Vansteenkiste, Reeve, Aelterman, Assor), Resilience (Masten), Positive youth Development (Lerner), Purpose (Damon).

What are the implications of this finding for SEL programs?

It is clear that the second component of these programs – **Basic motivational supports without SE instruction – is very important.**

Given the clear evidence for the fundamental importance of basic motivational supports, it is now important to ask:

Do we have evidence that direct instruction of SE skills can be beneficial also when it is not accompanied by Practices of Basic Motivational Support?

In my view the answer is NO.

Careful reading of meta-analyses & reviews (Durlak et al, 2011; Grant et al, 2017; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Weare & Nind, 2011), & exemplary programs (e.g., The 4Rs, Caring School Community, The responsive classroom, RULER, PATHS, Raising Healthy Children) indicates that:

The unique effects of direct SE instruction are usually examined together with the effects of basic motivational supports (confounding).

Therefore, it is not possible to separate the effects of direct SE instruction from the well-known effects of Basic Motivational Supports not using direct instruction.

Conclusion 1 – The Bad (?) News:

Because the effects are not examined separately (confounding), we do not presently know if **direct instruction of SE skills has significant positive effects also when standing alone.**

Import caveat: The research surveyed does not imply that to the fostering of SE skills in teachers is not important. Only that it may not be useful when done in the absence of basic motivational supports by teachers.

Conclusion 2 – The Good News:

While SEL research does not allow us to conclude that direct SE instruction can be beneficial as a stand alone effort, it is possible to interpret the findings as possibly suggesting that SE instruction may be beneficial when **combined** with practices providing Basic Motivational Supports.

Therefore, I propose to substitute the term SEL with the term **SESI: Socio Emotional Support & Instruction.**

A Model of Basic Motivational Supports & SE Instruction as Determinants of Students' Thriving

FOUNDATION: Basic Motivational Teacher/School Practices Supporting:

1. Students' needs (Bel.Rel.Saf.Com.Aut)
2. Autonomous motivation to help & learn
3. Positive views of self & others

Top - Less Critical: SE Instruction, primarily in contexts when SE skills are relevant to students & teacher concerns; Only when students trust the teacher.

Examples: Understanding self & others, listening, conflict management, emotion regulation; in conflicts, threats & failures

Desired SEL Outcomes

- Subjective Well-being
- Optimal academic, & Social functioning & growth

Possible implications for priorities of the ministry of education, Shefi, & teacher education

1. Under what conditions is Direct SE instruction likely to be beneficial? Can it be counter-productive?

Direct systematic instruction of SE skills by teachers (especially main teachers), as part of a curriculum, should occur **only** when teachers provide direct ongoing support for their students' basic needs, motivation, and self-views, and certainly do not frustrate these needs.

SE instruction by a teacher frustrating or not supporting students needs may even **boomerang**, and increase students' cynicism and alienation

2. Invest more in training in practices providing basic motivational supports and less in SE instruction?

Practices providing **basic motivational supports are often difficult to apply in sensitive and effective ways**. In Israel, this difficulty increases because there is not enough training and support, heterogenous classrooms, discipline problems, and pressures from parents and ministry of education.

Given that many teachers need considerable training and support in the application of basic motivational supports, **the Ministry of Education may consider providing more resources to training and support in the application of basic motivational practices than to SE instruction.**

3. Reducing the life-skills curriculum, and integrating it with Basic Motivational Supports?

It may be desirable to reduce direct teaching and activities cultivating SE skills, and devote more time to teacher and class routines and activities that directly support students needs, motivations, and self views.

Ideally, **life skill lessons will be conducted mainly as part of an effort to enhance teacher motivational supports**, and in this context there could be **a very fruitful integration between practices of basic motivational support and SE instruction.**

For example...

4. Effects on teachers' thinking on their role in nourishing experiences & connections that promote students' thriving

The emphasis on basic motivational supports is important because it fosters teachers' understanding that students thriving depends not only on the skills they develop, but at least as much, and perhaps more, on experiencing support and satisfaction of basic psychological needs, motivations, & positive self views.

Over-emphasizing skills may also promote a technical approach in which teachers view their role as skill builders, & neglect their role as “gardeners”, providing nourishing & vitalizing experiences & connections that allow students to flourish.



Questions for Further Thinking throughout the day and beyond:

How can we increase the likelihood that **teachers' ongoing behaviors** at school **would not contradict** (and undermine) the very SE skills and dispositions that the SEL program they teach tries to foster?

What do the **efforts & programs to be presented to day do** to provide teachers with the training, supports, & the organizational structure & climate they need, to be able to act in ways that meet students' needs - in contexts that are often difficult ?

END

Exemplary programs that always or often include both components & do not assess their separate effects:

1. Responsive Classroom
2. Four Rs
3. RULER
4. PATHS
5. Caring Community
6. Raising Healthy Children