

Social Emotional Learning – The missing piece to the LD Puzzle?



Children with learning disabilities are challenged to acquire the academic skills necessary for success in school. This can be further exasperated by a deficit in the social skills required for positive and meaningful interactions with the peers and adults in their lives. Could social emotional learning offer parents and educators a key to offering more rounded and comprehensive support to those under their care?

What is a Learning Disability?

The BC Ministry of Education recognizes that learning disabilities:

- can interfere with a student meeting their potential
- result in academic underachievement
- impact acquiring, organizing, making sense of, remembering and/or using of information
- are complex and vary considerably between individuals
- may also affect organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking
- are life-long

(Province of British Columbia, 2011)



Province of British Columbia (2011).

A Snapshot of Social Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning (SEL) as a process through which children (and adults!) learn skills necessary to be effective throughout life (Goleman et al. 2000-2011).

These are skills that help children to:

- calm down when upset or angry
- develop positive relationships with peers
- solve problems with peers respectfully
- make safe decisions
- be healthier and happier
- be more successful in school and beyond

Five competency clusters of SEL



Goleman et al. (2000-2011).

Is there a relationship between social skills and academic achievement of children with LD?

In a recent study, Milsom and Glanville (2010) examined data collected through the National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2 (NLTS-2) in search of a relationship between social skills and grades in children with a learning disability (LD) or emotional disturbances (ED). The data used in this study was collected, through surveys, from parents of a group of 734 adolescents in grade 7 through 12. In an attempt to expand on current research, the authors sought a deeper understanding of factors leading to underachievement offering educators and parents information to present more targeted intervention.

Three main categories of social skills were examined for their effect on grades, which the authors used as a measure of academic success were: social assertiveness, self-control, and social cooperation.

From the parents perspective, significant direct and indirect effects of social skills on grades were discovered. Of the three chosen categories, social cooperation was shown to influence grades directly. Milsom and Glanville (2010) suggest that **cooperation in the classroom among students and the teacher, leads to a more comprehensive use of available instruction time**. When cooperative skills are lacking, a direct correlation to lower grades can be seen. This is directly related to student behaviour and indirectly to the effect of this behaviour on the classroom climate.

Social cooperation and self-control were both shown to be important factors in students development of relationships with teachers and peers whereas social assertiveness was seen to be more relevant in peer relationships.



It is clear that from a parent's perspective, social skills are directly related to better grades. The authors further acknowledge there are many other factors that will influence the academic achievement of students with LD including:

- Relationships with teachers
- Level of school enjoyment
- Adequate time for skill development

Understanding the effect of social skills will provide a starting point for intervention.



Sample questions from each category

Social Assertiveness:

- Joined activities without being told
- Made friends easily
- Confident in social situations
- Started conversations

Self- Control:

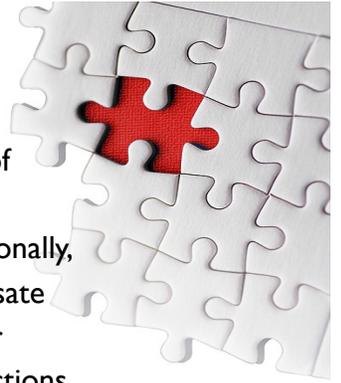
- Ended disagreements calmly
- Avoided known trouble situations
- Received criticism well
- Controlled temper in peer arguments

Social Cooperation:

- Persevered until work was complete
- Spoke in appropriate tone at home
- Cooperated with family members

What is the connection between SEL and LD?

Children with learning disabilities also exhibit difficulties with recognizing emotions in themselves and others, regulating and managing emotions and recognizing their areas of strengths and needs (Elias, 2004.) They tend to find difficulty with peer acceptance, interactions with peers and adults, and reading nonverbal and other social cues. Additionally, students with learning challenges put forth tremendous amounts of energy to compensate for these difficulties during the school day. This leaves them with little to no energy for picking up and understanding social cues as well as exerting self-control in their interactions.



“ SEL as the missing piece, helps bridge the gap in both theory and practice with regard to improving the outcomes for students with learning disabilities. ” (Elias, 2004)

Link between reading and language impairments and SEL

Children may not:

- use correctly code language in ways that develop and maintain relationships
- be able to link past and present to bring into conversations
- anticipate others reactions
- interpret connotations
- differentiate between joking and serious
- use interpersonal skills: social distance, tone of voice, pauses when talking
- take listener needs into consideration

In his study, Elias (2004), identified three SEL skills and the implications for how students with LD approach school work. These are described below:

Recognizing Emotions in Self and Others

Children with LD have an insufficient vocabulary for describing feelings. This leads to difficulties recognizing feelings both in themselves and in others.

If our “feelings vocabulary” is how we process the world, then only using words such as mad, glad or sad (commonly used words by children with LD to describe feelings) presents children with limited options for responding to these emotions.

Generally, 'mad' feelings lead to externalizing behaviours such as lashing out, while 'sad' feelings lead children to resign from tasks and promotes learned helplessness.

Regulating and Managing Strong Emotions

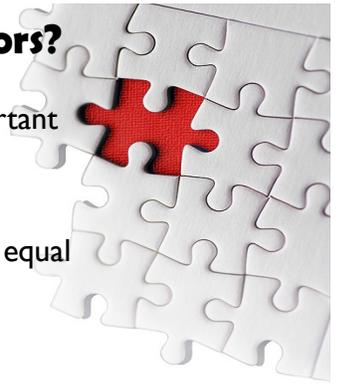
Most students feel confused by the material being presented in a lesson at some point or another. This is only compounded for children with LD, who often experience anger as a result of this confusion. These strong emotions interfere with learning. Elias (2004) suggests it is unrealistic to expect students with LD to be able to exercise self-control independently.

Recognizing Strengths and Areas of Need

We all learn best through our areas of strength. Providing children the opportunity to use their strengths can lead to increased willingness to engage with tasks, including those in their areas of need. Working in a preferred learning modality offers “...windows into the souls of children and ways to reach them in powerful and meaningful ways.” (Elias, 2004)

What are the implications for students, parents and educators?

When developing interventions to support children with learning disabilities, it is important to keep in mind that a focus on cooperation skills alone is not sufficient (Milsom and Glanville, 2010). All SEL skills are essential for successful classroom interactions and a productive learning environment. Parents have indicated they rate these skills to be of equal importance to academic skills. A cycle of direct instruction, rehearsal and practice and feedback in combination with modeling is recommended (Elias, 2004).



What do children with LD need in addition to academic support?

- ✓ supportive learning environment
- ✓ caring relationship with their teacher
- ✓ support developing skills necessary to build strong relationships
- ✓ caring adults who understand the ways in which emotions direct attention
- ✓ help focusing in the middle of these emotional distractions
- ✓ development of self-monitoring strategies
- ✓ building of “feelings vocabulary”

Something to Think About:

Skills Acquisition Deficit vs
Skill Performance Deficit

Do children not possess the social skill you are asking them to employ or do they just perform the skill inconsistently?

To target individual needs you will need to determine whether the child is deficient in the acquisition of a skill or in using the skill.

Consideration of contextual (playground vs science class) or interpersonal (peers vs teachers) factors that contribute to the development or use of a focus skill should also be undertaken.

(Milsom and Glanville, 2010).



Elias (2004) offers suggested implications for how attending to the three areas of SEL identified below can improve the academic performance of students with LD.

Recognizing Emotions in Self and Others

- understanding of plot intricacies, intentions and actions of characters is largely dependent of one's emotional vocabulary
 - limited vocab = limited understanding
- ability to interact with peers and adults is dependent upon the ability to accurately read the emotions of others

Regulating and Managing Emotions

- Feelings Thermometer
 - serves as a visual cue to self- monitor emotions
- Clarity/Confusion Thermometer
 - ranging from complete confusion to complete clarity
- Most essential is a conversation between the teacher and the student prior to thermometer implementation
 - removes guilt and stigma from feelings of anger and confusion

Recognizing Strengths and Areas of Need

- working in a preferred modality will increase confidence and enjoyment in ways that can be cut off if they are “off-modality”
- working in groups creates a chance to build both inter and intra-personal skills that are essential for academic success as well as life after schooling

References



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- Province of British Columbia. (2011). *Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities: A Guide for Teachers*. British Columbia Ministry of Education. Retrieved from http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/docs/learning_disabilities_guide.pdf.

Additional Resources / Further Readings

- Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning: <http://casel.org/>
- Howard Gardner – Theory of Multiple Intelligences: <http://howardgardner.com/multiple-intelligences/>
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada: <http://www.ldac-acta.ca/>
- Social Emotional Learning for Educators - <http://www.edutopia.org/social-emotional-learning>



Interventions that are comprehensive and link academic and social -emotional learning have the greatest likelihood of helping students with learning disabilities.

(Elias, 2004)

