



# Cultivating the Social, Emotional, and Inner Lives of Children and Teachers

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This article highlights research in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and demonstrates how teachers help students learn the skills to handle stress, manage emotions, achieve wellness, and develop inner resilience.

Adults often feel the pressures of today's fast-paced world and think back longingly to a time when their daily lives were a lot less hectic. One third of the respondents in one study report that they are living with "extreme stress" and almost half feel that the level of stress in their lives has increased over the past five years (American Psychological Association, 2007). Children are not immune to this high pressure epidemic.

## ***Stressed Out and No Tools to Cope***

The National Kids Poll surveyed 875 children, ages nine through thirteen, about what caused their stress and what coping strategies they used. The leading sources of stress were school related (36%) such as grades, school, and homework; stress in the family (32%); and peer-related stress including friends, gossip, and teasing (21%). The top three coping strategies were to play or do something active (52%), to listen to music (44%), and to watch TV or play a video game (42%). Of the top ten coping strategies chosen, not one involved being able to calm oneself through self-reflection (Lyness, 2005).

Adults must work to reduce excessive childhood stress but must also help children develop effective coping skills. Fortunately, teachers all over the world are doing just that. Students are being taught how to regulate their emotions by focusing their attention inward to better manage the stresses that come their way.

## ***Adults must work to reduce excessive childhood stress but must also help children develop effective coping skills.***

A few months ago, I witnessed this firsthand in a first grade classroom in a public school in East Harlem, New York City. This particular class included lots of Special Education students who were very hyperactive. Their teacher, Tom Ropeke, was getting them ready to listen to a specific CD—something they were very used to doing. The students quieted down and became still as the CD started with the man’s voice telling them to listen to some sounds. The voice reminded them not to name out loud the sound they heard, but just say to themselves what they thought the sound was. As they listened to the instructions, they began to respond with their whole bodies; for example, when they heard the sound of a bird, they moved their arms like a bird. They managed to not speak but stayed calm and focused for a full six minutes. The voice on the CD was that of Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). The words were from *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children* (Lantieri, 2008).

Tom is one of many teachers who are part of the Inner Resilience Program (IRP), a nonprofit organization which was founded soon after the tragic

events of September 11, 2001. IRP has been training teachers who, in turn, are teaching thousands of students in “contemplative educational practices.” These activities help children strengthen neural pathways, enabling them to pay attention and manage impulsivity.

## ***Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning***

A growing body of research suggests that helping children develop good social and emotional skills early in life makes a big difference in their long-term health and well-being. In his ground-breaking book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman identified EQ—emotional intelligence—as being as important as IQ in terms of children’s healthy development and future life success. “Given how much emphasis schools and admissions tests put on it, IQ alone explains surprisingly little of achievement in work or life” (Goleman, 1998, p. 19). The highest estimate of how much IQ accounts for how persons perform in their careers is about 25% (Hunter & Schmidt, 1984) and perhaps as low as 4-10% (Sternberg, 1996).

Goleman established the importance of emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective use of one’s IQ, that is, one’s cognitive skills and knowledge. He made the connection between our feelings and our thinking more explicit by pointing out how the brain’s emotional and executive areas are interconnected. A child’s brain goes through major growth that does not end until the mid-twenties. The sculpting of the brain’s circuitry during this period of growth (called neuroplasticity) depends to a great degree on a child’s daily experiences. Environmental influences powerfully shape a child’s social and emotional neural circuits. For example, children who learn how to calm down when they are upset develop greater strength in the brain’s circuits for managing distress (Goleman, 2008).

## ***Social and Emotional Learning is often called the “missing piece” in school improvement efforts.***

Many of the skills defined as essential for effectiveness in the modern workplace—for example, working with a team, relating to diverse colleagues and customers, analyzing and generating solutions to problems, and persisting in the face of setbacks—are social and emotional competencies. As a result, schools are expected to not only promote academic

success, but also enhance health, prevent problem behaviors, and prepare young people better for the world of work and engaged citizenship.

Social and Emotional Learning is often called the “missing piece” in school improvement efforts. SEL is informed by scholarly research demonstrating that all children can have a school experience that helps them to be not just academically competent but supports them in being engaged life-long learners who are self-aware, caring and connected to others, and active contributors to a more just, peaceful, productive, and sustainable world.

SEL is the process by which children and even adults develop fundamental skills for success in school and life. SEL teaches the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically. The field builds from work in child development, classroom management, prevention of problem behavior, and new knowledge about the role of the brain in social and cognitive growth. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five inter-related sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The ability to coordinate these competencies when dealing with daily situations and challenges provides a foundation for better adjustment and school performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores. The definitions of the five competency clusters for students are:

- **Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one’s feelings and thoughts and their influence on behaviors. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations, and possessing a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism.
- **Self-management:** The ability to regulate one’s emotions, cognitions, and behaviors to set and achieve personal and educational goals. This includes delaying gratification, managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and persevering in addressing challenges.
- **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when needed.
- **Responsible decision-making:** The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior, social interactions, and school based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

There are two primary approaches to promoting social and emotional competency in a school environment. The first is skill development, which requires explicit instruction in social and emotional skills in a systematic and sequenced way that spans all grade levels. Implementing an evidence-based SEL program requires opportunity for children to be actively involved in their learning, with adequate time for practice, reflection, and reinforcement of specific social and emotional competencies.

### ***SEL teaches the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically.***

The second approach focuses on creating positive school environments or climates that are safe, respectful, caring, and well-managed. A learning environment that cultivates SEL is characterized by supportive relationships, both student-to-student and student-to-teacher. Instructional practices and curriculum are relevant and challenging. The school climate extends beyond the classroom to the hallways, playing fields, and student clubs, as well as among all school staff. Thus, SEL develops skills and creates the conditions to maximize optimal performance and caring human connections.

The scope and strength of the research base behind SEL are significant. As a point of comparison, studies of the impacts of reducing class size show smaller academic gains than does SEL instruction. In challenging economic times, the payoff of investing in children’s social and

emotional development is substantial (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). For example, one major multi-year study found that by the time they were adults, students who received Social and Emotional Learning in grades 1-6 had an 11% higher grade-point average and significantly greater levels of school commitment, attachment, and completion at age 18. The same research showed that the rate of students required repeating a grade who received Social and Emotional Learning in grades 1-6 was 14% versus 23% of students in a control group. At age 18, students in the same study showed a 30% lower incidence of school behavior problems, a 20% lower rate of violent delinquency, and a 40% lower rate of heavy alcohol use (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2005). Clearly, the decision-making and self-mastery skills these students learned early in life paid off greatly as they grew older and encountered life's increasingly complex and challenging choices.

### ***The Added Dimension: Contemplative Educational Experiences***

At the cutting edge of this work is a focus on the inner life of both students and teachers. Contemplative educational experiences take the skills of social and emotional learning to a deeper level. Managing emotions builds self-discipline; strengthening empathy encourages caring and compassion; self-awareness leads to a new depth of inner exploration. Mindful awareness fosters inner calm and resilience, while values for moral living and caring for others are also nurtured (Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006).

### ***Adults cannot repeatedly keep telling our children “calm down” or “pay attention” without providing them with practical guidelines for how to do so.***

In many classrooms in the United States and elsewhere, teachers are using contemplative practices in purposeful ways that nurture their inner lives. Thus, before we begin to teach young people to calm down and relax, we may first need to experience contemplative practice ourselves. Daniel Goleman's CD, *The Art of Meditation* (2001) is an excellent resource for both beginners and more experienced practitioners, providing four different reflective exercises from which to choose.

Having taken time for personal reflection, we can then begin to equip young people with the skills to become more aware of and to regulate their emotions. Given the busy, sometimes frenzied nature of our lives, reflective moments are often missing. The more children can begin to experience quiet and stillness, the more they can feel an inner balance and sense of purpose which can offset the overstimulation that is so intrusive in modern lives (Lantieri, 2008). The benefits of such a regular practice can include:

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- Improved attention and concentration
- Responding to stress in a calmer manner
- Control over one's thinking without ruminating on unwelcome thoughts
- Greater opportunity for deeper communication and understanding between adults and children as thoughts and feelings are shared on a regular basis

Adults cannot repeatedly keep telling our children “calm down” or “pay attention” without providing them with practical guidelines for how to do so. Systematic lessons in contemplative practices can help them cultivate their budding capacities and facilitate the development of healthy neural pathways. Teaching these practices to students is increasing not only their social and emotional skills, but their resilience—the capacity to not only cope, but thrive in the face of adversity.

In the spring of 2006, the Inner Resilience Program (IRP) received generous funding for research to determine the efficacy of this work. A randomized control trial examined the impact of the program on the well-being of teachers and students as well as on the climate of their classroom. A total of 57 teachers of grades 3-5 as well as 855 students from New York City public schools participated in the study. The teachers were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group during the 2007-2008 school year. Teachers in the treatment group participated in the IRP. Activities intended to reduce teacher stress and increase their concentration, attention, job satisfaction, and relations with their colleagues. These included a series of weekly yoga classes, monthly Nurturing the Inner Life meetings, a weekend residential retreat, and

training and support in the use of a curriculum module for students. It was hypothesized that changes in the teachers would have a positive influence on the climate of their classrooms, which in turn would affect students' attention, frustration levels, and acting out behaviors. The program also provided curriculum activities for students (Lantieri, Nagler Kyse, Harnett, & Malmus, 2011).

Teachers and students from the treatment and control groups completed a battery of surveys in the fall and spring of the school year. Between-group analyses indicated several notable differences favoring treatment groups. These included reduced stress levels, increased attention and mindfulness, and greater perceived relational trust. Additionally, third-grade students of treatment teachers perceived that they had significantly more autonomy and influence in their classes at the end of the school year. Analyses of student wellness indicated that the program had a significant, positive impact on reducing frustration levels for third- and fourth-grade students.

### **Best Practices in Contemplative Teaching and Learning**

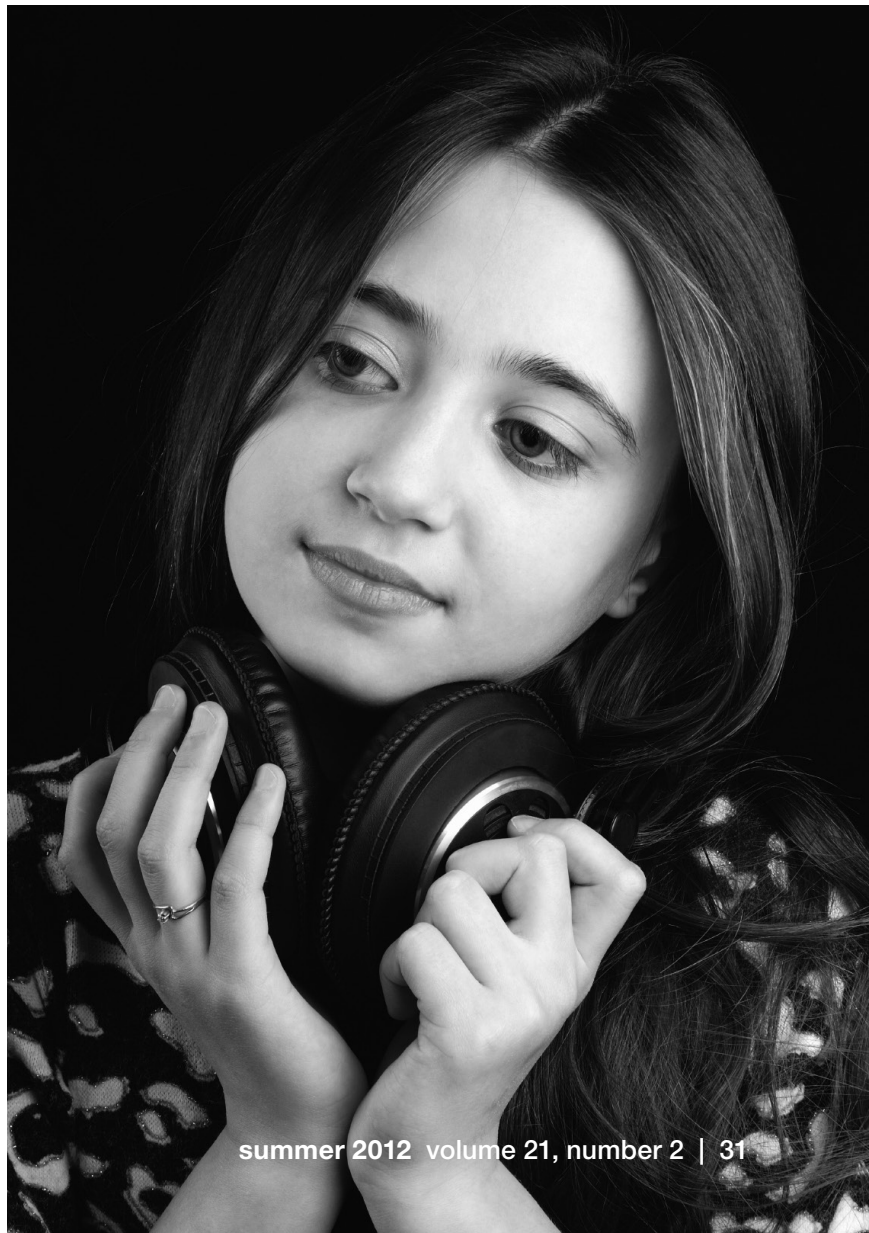
Learning to be more mindful and appreciative of silence is not likely to unfold in a straight line for either children or adults. There will be days when it might seem that nothing we are doing is working. Then suddenly, things will gel: when we lose our cool, one of our students might prompt us to take a breath and we will realize just how deeply they have been integrating these ideas. Gradually, practicing to be still and reflective will feel less forced or artificial and will become more automatic and authentic. The ideal scenario is to have a daily quiet time in our classrooms. However, we might build up to this gradually.

Creating a "peace corner" in the classroom can also be helpful. Young people can go to this area whenever they need calm and stillness to regain their inner balance. This calming corner can also be used when a student feels over-whelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally—times when being alone would be helpful. The whole class designs the space.

The children in Vera Slywinsky's fourth grade classroom participated in setting up the peace corner which enabled them to find peace amidst the turmoil of their lives:

*The most astounding development has been the children's interest in the peace corner. They have brought beautiful photos, postcards of warm and exotic places, and stuffed animals to decorate our corner. And they have not been at all hesitant to utilize it. Within the first week of its creation, I had a student whose uncle died after a long battle with cancer in Ecuador. Unfortunately, the family could not afford to attend the funeral. The student was grateful for the peace corner. Another child was evicted from her home. The peace corner brought much comfort to her. Her family is now settled but she was able to deal with those unpleasant feelings at school so she could in fact be more ready to learn. I am so happy that my children have collectively forged a safe place to begin to heal, survive, and appreciate the joy we have in supporting each other!*

Some peace corners include pictures or photos of some of the students' favorite elements from nature, chimes, and mandala coloring books. The peace



corner needs to be large enough for at least one youngster to recline with comfortable pillows and a CD player and earphones with soothing music or recordings of sounds from nature. Children enjoy the opportunity to self-regulate their emotions in this way.

## ***One gift for ourselves and our children is that of silence and stillness.***

Transitions and other stressful times during the day (such as getting ready for lunch or trying to meet other pressures of time) offer great opportunities to stop for a moment and honor the shift from one activity to another. The sound of soft, slow classical music can really help change the way we feel at such moments. While music could be used as a steady background, it is even more effective when there is a music break, stopping for as little as three minutes to listen quietly. Such breaks happen during times of transition when young people are focusing on something intently and need to stop, or when they start to feel the symptoms of heightened stress. Listening to quiet music lowers respiration and heart rate and can change emotional moods.

One gift for ourselves and our children is that of silence and stillness. We can find times in the school day to take a quick break to pause and be still and quiet and take a few deep breaths together. For example, if we have a habit of teaching right up until the end of the day, we might make it a classroom practice to have a few minutes of silence at the end of the day and ask young people to notice what they see, hear, or feel during that time. We can also choose to bring moments of silence into other engaging activities, such as drawing, writing, or walking.

Helping young people know how to stay tuned to their bodily cues can also be helpful. Young children may have an innate ability to tune in to their bodies' signals. As they grow older, they get messages from the outer world to turn off their natural sensitivity. Before they can release stress, they need first to be aware that they are stressed. We can model this awareness ourselves by making a note of times when our hearts are beating fast, our breathing has become shallow, or other signs of stress. This helps students to identify their own stress triggers. With this inner awareness, they start to be able to reduce the body's stress reaction.

Literature can also provide a helpful way to strengthen young people's inner lives. Reading a book out loud together with young people can be a wonderful way to experience a contemplative moment—especially if it is done with intentionality. The reading pace becomes slower with opportunities to pause along the way. Young people experience one another's voices and can notice the various emotions that are stirring within each of them. There can be lots of unplanned moments where the story can take us to a deeper place.

## ***A Hope for a More Peaceful Future***

What are the hopes in the lives of the children we serve? Whether they will realize their hopes depends on whether we have equipped them with the inner strength to meet the challenges of daily life. Can they be resilient in the face of obstacles, as well as opportunities? Can they bounce back and even surpass their level of coping when the tests of life come their way?

We must give our children this kind of lifeline. The world is too uncertain for them not to build an inner reservoir of strength from which they can draw. The benefits are far reaching—from better health and increased ability to learn, to more fulfilled and happier lives. As Gandhi's words continue to remind us, we can help them to “be the change we wish to see in the world.”

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