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## **Bringing Together Mind and Heart in the Classroom: An Independent Study**

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# Bringing Together Mind and Heart in the Classroom

An Independent Study

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of  
Science in Education

Bank Street College of Education

2011

# **Bringing Together Mind and Heart in the Classroom**

**Allison Fisch**

The purpose of this thesis is to address the brain research indicating the importance of teaching social and emotional learning and mindfulness within the classroom.

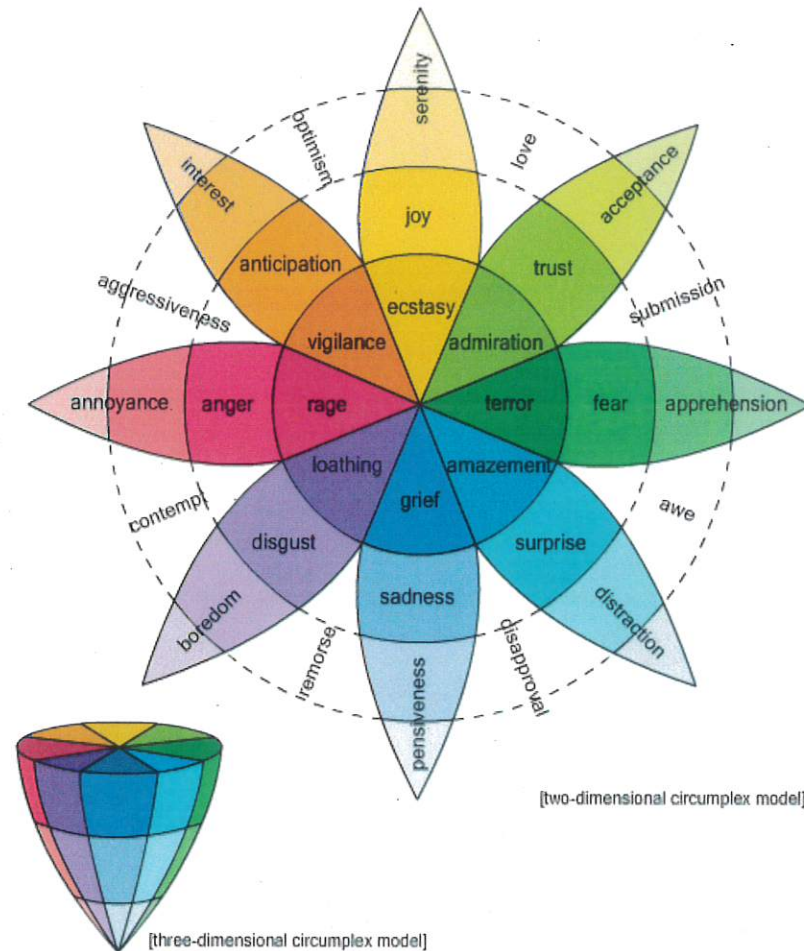
Studies denote the possible emotional and social disorders that can stem from a lack of social and emotional awareness. Educators and administrators are provided with activities and techniques that can be adapted into the curriculum with ease. The activities and techniques reinforce the child's ability to recognize their emotions and gain resilience as well as aiding in their empathy for others. Research supports the concept of mindfulness and how it can be successful in the social and emotional development of children.

“I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.” ~ Louisa May Alcott

All children attend school to learn to become academically successful individuals. Although there may be obstacles and challenges along the way, resilience is the key to emotional success. This thesis addresses the significance of bringing together the mind and the heart into the classroom, as Daniel Goleman identifies so eloquently in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*. It's crucial to identify what emotions and learning are and how they bridge the gap to becoming an astute mindful individual.

Emotions: what are they and why are they crucial to a child's well being?  
Emotions are expressed feelings, behaviors and changes in the body that are usually directed toward a specific object, event or experience, but can also be private and subjective. Robert Plutchik's theory of emotion categorizes emotions into eight basic and eight advanced forms. In Plutchik's "Wheel of Emotion" he demonstrates the range in which emotions occur. For example, apprehension can lead to fear and ultimately to terror. The diagram below displays the relationship of moods and feelings through the eight basic emotions; serenity, acceptance, apprehension, distraction, pensiveness, boredom, annoyance and interest. (Schlegelmilch, 2005, p. 2)

## Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions



There have been many theories of emotion dating by to Charles Darwin. The Cannon-Bard theory of emotion argued that, "...the hypothalamus is the brain region that is involved in the emotional response to stimuli and that such responses are inhibited by evolutionarily more recent neocortical regions." (Tim Dalgleish, 2004, p. 2) Cannon and Bard's work proved that emotions were the perception of bodily change and are dependent on sensory stimulation. In other words, the experience of an emotion occurs at the same time the body responds to that emotion.

The act of expressing one's feelings is directly linked to our inner emotions. For example, if a person is feeling worried inside, their outward expressions will reflect that emotion. Whether it is shown through a solemn face or hunched shoulders, their body will physically take on the feeling of being worried. Although this physical occurrence is not directly taught, the act of acknowledging these expressions in others and catering to them is a skill that is acquired throughout childhood. Children with this the ability to recognize emotions can empathize with their peers and can be successful at engaging with others.

Learning is defined as the acquisition of knowledge of skills through experience, practice, studying or by being taught. Children learn by watching their peers and experiencing the world around them. The classroom is a valuable place for children to learn to recognize the emotions of their peers, as they are becoming social individuals. "One could argue that the chief purpose of education is to cultivate children's building of repertoires of cognitive and behavioral strategies and options, helping them to recognize the complexity of situations and to respond in increasingly flexible, sophisticated, and creative ways." (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007, p. 9) It is important to provide children the skills in order to engage in healthy emotional development. Overall, "emotion serves as a powerful vehicle for enhancing or inhibiting learning; it is integral to all we do." (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 39)

Emotional intelligence as first identified by Daniel Goleman (1995) in children can be described as, "learning how to recognize, manage, and harness their feelings; empathizing; and handling the feelings that arise in their relationships." It's not often that cognitive abilities and emotions are considered interrelated. However, research has

shown that, "...the aspects of cognition that are recruited most heavily in education, including learning, attention, memory, decision making, motivation, and social functioning, are both profoundly affected by emotion and in fact subsumed within the processes of emotion." (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007, p. 9) It is important to recognize that learning and emotional intelligence are related. Occurrences either through real life experience or imagined can be perceived as emotional triggers, which can lead to changes in the mind and the body. Emotional triggers cause the mind to react to a situation or event that can generate an unsafe or threatening feeling.

The brain is a crucial source to understanding the positive and negative effects of emotional intelligence. The limbic area, which is located in the mid-brain, is comprised of synapses that regulate emotions, as well as override rational thought. The amygdala and hippocampus are two parts within the limbic area, "Together, they play an active, highly integrated role in our personal actions, reactions, emotions and motions." (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 40) The amygdala regulates emotional and physical responses to negative stressors, where as the hippocampus classifies experiences and learning into long-term memory. As a whole, the limbic area is the oldest and most reactive part of the brain, which is commonly known as the stress-response system.

When an emotional trigger presents itself, the brain reacts with a "fight-or-flight" response. According the Daniel Goleman (1995), The limbic portion of the brain releases a surge of "...catecholamines, which generate a quick, episodic rush of energy...this energy surge lasts for minutes, during which it readies the body for a good fight or a quick flight, depending on how the emotional brain sizes up the opposition." (p. 60) This surge of emotion is the brain's way of protecting the individual from feeling unsafe in

their current environment. Goleman and psychologist Dolf Zillmann discuss how the universal trigger for anger, which is often the emotional reaction for children, is feeling endangered. "Endangerment can be signaled not just by an outright physical threat but also, as is more often the case, by a symbolic threat to self-esteem or dignity: being treated unjustly or rudely, being insulted or demeaned, being frustrated in pursuing an important goal." (Goleman, 1995, p. 60) It's important to recognize that there are many pathways in which children have emotional reactions, as well as to acknowledge the effects of the "fight-or-flight" response.

Neuroplasticity allows the nerve cells in the brain to compensate and adjust to activities in response to new situations or to changes in the environment.

"Neuroplasticity, as scientists call it, means that the sculpting of the brain's circuitry during this period of brain growth depends to a great degree on what a child experiences day-to-day." (Lantieri, 2008, p. 2) When situations trigger strong emotional reactions in a child, accumulated feelings become "uncorked" and can lead to negative responses. By eliminating emotional triggers in the classroom, the limbic area can remain calm and the hippocampus doesn't need to signal stress hormones within the body, ultimately eliminating physical stress and anxiety. According to Robert K. Greenleaf (2003), "concern for one's emotional well-being can elicit hormonal responses that can impede cognition...educators should be aware of emotional land mines (such as put-downs...high anxiety...) and construct an environment free of such things as fear, embarrassment, humiliation, harassment, and other elements that interfere with the learning process." (p. 40) What happens cognitively to a child that is in an emotionally and socially unsafe environment?



Amanda is a fourteen-year-old girl who was born with a neurological disorder, which affects the language portion of her brain. She is diagnosed with apraxia, which is a speech disorder. At the age of twelve, Amanda graduated into a new private school located outside of Manhattan, that was chosen by her parents based on her unique needs. Amanda was confronted with new challenges, such as getting to class independently and learning how to socialize with her peers. Due to Amanda's inability to communicate her thoughts and feelings, she was tormented by her classmates and misunderstood by her teachers. The majority of Amanda's teachers identified her inability to communicate and challenges as behavioral issues. Within months Amanda's progress in school deteriorated. She developed severe anxiety over getting to class on time and taking the bus home. Unfortunately, the school viewed her anxiety as a "behavioral issue" and did very little to contact her parents or get to the heart of the problem. Within the year Amanda became depressed, she wouldn't get out of bed, she refused to eat and became tormented by her anxiety. Amanda has been hospitalized numerous times in the past three years, she has not returned to school since the age of twelve and she has been diagnosed with depression and an anxiety disorder. Amanda lives in and out of doctor's offices, she is exposed to different variations of adult medications and occasionally receives one-on-one yoga instruction to reduce stress and calm her anxiety.

Amanda's case demonstrates the effects anxiety can have a child with a diagnosed mental disorder. According to Linda Lantieri (2008), "It is estimated that one out of five nine -to seventeen-year-olds has a diagnosable mental disorder." (p. 11) Unfortunately, for many children, like Amanda, emotional disorders or unmanaged stress can be misconstrued as inappropriate behavior. "Children are reprimanded by teachers and parents for actions that are really stress reactions, rather than intentional behavior. The situation becomes a downward spiral of one stress reaction after another, and both adult and child are caught in it." (Lantieri, 2008, p. 12) Amanda's inability to communicate her thoughts and feelings lead to an overwhelming amount of stress and anxiety. As educators we need to be aware of stress reactions in order to refrain from labeling children with anxiety as having "behavioral issues."

Anxiety and depression are two serious repercussions for children exposed to emotionally and socially unsafe environments. It may be possible that these cognitive disabilities can result from a lack of education in social and emotional learning. Daniel Goleman (1995) discusses the findings of psychologist, Robert Ader in his book

Emotional Intelligence. Ader discovered that the immune system is linked to the central nervous system, including the brain. (p. 166-167) His discovery proves that the emotional effects from negative experiences can trigger the limbic area of the brain to release stress hormones and potentially cause emotional disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

Massachusetts General Hospital (2010) considers anxiety disorders to be, "...one of the most common mental health conditions in children and adolescents...Generalized anxiety disorder affects approximately three to four percent of children" (p. 1). Often children attempt coping mechanisms for dealing with the overwhelming sensation of worry or anxiety, however sometimes these strategies can be detrimental to peer interactions. Levine (1994) describes these coping behaviors as, "Aggressive outbursts in a child who can think of no better options for dealing with stress or conflict; this may be part of a broader picture of problematic problem solving and strategy use" (p. 222).

Anxiety can be injurious to young children and adolescents. However, social and emotional education can provide individuals with anxiety the skills to identify situations that trigger worry and use relaxation methods, such as mindfulness, to self soothe.

According to Daniel Goleman (1995), "Symptoms of depression, whether major or minor, affect up to one third of teenagers; for girls, the incidence of depression doubles at puberty." (p. 232) Depression can present itself in different ways, such as feeling lonely or unloved, preferring to be alone, lacking energy, being secretive, or feeling unhappy for long periods of time. "Suicide has become a growing public health concern as successive generations have shown a parallel increase of suicide and depression in the pediatric age group." (Son & Kirchner, 2000, p. 1) Children need to be taught in a safe environment to recognize their feelings and heighten their self-awareness, in order to

combat emotional disorders like depression. It is important for educators to be aware, "...that some depressed children attempt to compensate for their low self-esteem by trying to please others and be accepted. Because in this effort they may excel academically and behave well, their depression may go unnoticed." (Son & Kirchner, 2000, p. 2)

No child is exempt from emotional risks, such as withdrawal or social issues, attention and focus issues, delinquency or aggression, or even anxiety and depression. "Scientists now believe that improving attention and memory, along with freeing the mind from impulsivity and distress, puts a child's mind in the best zone for learning. And social and emotional learning does just that." (Lantieri, 2008, p. 3) Children who are born without a cognitive disability, unlike Amanda, can still succumb to long-term emotional and social issues if they are not provided adequate instruction for emotional intelligence. For instance, Erik Eckholm and Katie Zezima (2010) document the cyber bullying case of fifteen-year-old Phoebe Prince in *The New York Times* (p. A12):

Ms. Prince, who entered South Hadley High last fall after moving from Ireland, was in emotional torment after weeks of being called an "Irish slut" and other names, and also became increasingly worried about the loudly voiced physical threats, students told investigators. She told a friend that she was "not a tough girl" and "would not know how to fight," and at one point she asked friends to surround her as she walked in the hall. The 40 pages of documents summarize the alleged crimes of the three girls who were arraigned Thursday in Hadley — Ashley Longe, Flannery Mullins and Sharon Chanon Velazquez. They have been charged as youthful offenders with felonies including violation of civil rights and stalking, and have also been charged with similar crimes under juvenile laws. Three other students — Sean Mulveyhill, 17, Kayla Narey, 17, and Austin Renaud, 18 — have been charged as adults... He (Gus Sayer, the superintendent of schools) said that Ms. Prince had initially thrived at school but that after an incident in November that he could not describe, officials realized that she had become unhappy, and started monitoring her. "We were aware of some of the things that changed for Phoebe, but we weren't aware of any bullying," Mr. Sayer said. "If she had said she was being bullied we would have acted on it immediately." Ms. Prince tried to ignore the taunts. But as she walked home that afternoon, the documents said, Ms. Longe passed by in a car and threw an empty energy-drink can at her, called her a name and laughed. Ms. Prince walked home crying and later that afternoon, her younger sister found her hanging by a scarf from the apartment stairwell.

Cases of personal and cyber bullying like that of Phoebe Prince are unfortunately becoming all too familiar in our schools. Technology has paved the way for bullies to taunt their victims in new ways and a lack of empathy can be blamed for it. Students who lack empathy towards their peers usually have very little self-awareness and have difficulty managing their emotions. Students who are bullies have trouble "...seeing the links between thoughts, feelings, and reactions; knowing if thoughts and feelings are ruling a decision; seeing the consequences of alternative choices; and applying these insights to decisions...realizing what is behind a feeling (for example, the hurt that triggers anger), and learning ways to handle anxieties, anger, and sadness." (Goleman, 1995, p. 268) With social and emotional education, children can have self-awareness, be able to manage their emotions and have empathy towards others, therefore eliminating the pathway that leads to becoming a bully.

Not all students who are angry will turn toward bullying. Many angry adolescents will withdraw socially, feel that their peers are being more hostile than they actually are or perceive unfairness when it is in fact unintentional. These students usually consider themselves victims and feel as though their teachers are consistently blaming them for doing something when they are innocent. (Goleman, 1995, p. 235) All of these students, including Amanda, are emotionally vulnerable and need guidance and support to become emotionally intelligent individuals.

How do feelings such as anxiety, depression or anger affect children and their ability to learn? According to Linda Lantieri (2008), "Educators and parents alike are now much more aware that when chronic anxiety, anger, or upset feelings intrude on children's thoughts, less capacity is available in working memory to process what they

are trying to learn.” (p. 17). Schools across the country have taken the initiative to promote healthy development in their students, which include recognizing their emotions and relationships with peers. “By offering a secure base, the caring adults in children’s lives can create an environment that lets children’s brains function at their best. That base becomes a safe haven, a zone of strength from which they can venture forth to explore, to master something new, to achieve.” (Lantieri, 2008, p. 2) Research shows that teaching students academic skills coupled with social and emotional learning enables them to perform better academically.

How do we as educators shape emotional intelligence in children in order to suppress the negative outcomes that can extend from a lack of empathy and feeling of community? A crucial window of opportunity for children to learn emotional intelligence is within the years of childhood. Emotional intelligence acquired in childhood is set in our neurological wiring and becomes harder to change or ignore later in life. Daniel Goleman (1995) quotes John Gottman, a psychologist who explains the ways to provide children with skills needed for emotional intelligence. “...By coaching them emotionally, talking to children about their feelings and how to understand them, not being critical and judgmental, problem-solving about emotional predicaments, coaching them on what to do...” (p. 227) The understanding and implementation of these skills can lead to a child with a strong sense of emotional and social awareness.

Children should be taught self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making and relationship skills in order to master any emotional or social challenge that may present itself. This mastery of emotional intelligence is the overall goal of social and emotional learning or SEL. SEL programs in schools cater to

individual students, however they simultaneously shape the school's climate and community, as well as increase academic success.

“Another set of challenges for twenty-first-century schools is that they serve large numbers of students who lack social and emotional competencies, experience mental-health problems, and engage in health-damaging behaviors such as substance use, violence, delinquency, sexual risk taking, and self-destructive behavior.” (Weissberg and O'Brien, 2004, p. 87) The use of an SEL program in schools, not only enhances social-emotional competency among students, it also promotes academic engagement, character building and citizenship within the community. There are numerous articles and independent organizations that provide statistics to support the use of SEL programs in schools across the nation.

One independent organization, which has done extensive research to support SEL programs in schools, including those in New York City, is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). One of the SEL programs CASEL (2011) discusses is in Brooklyn, New York at P.S. 24. “The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP, a CASEL SElect program) employs interactive techniques to teach children skills in communication, anger management, negotiation, mediation, cooperation, and intercultural understanding.” The following review demonstrates the progress made through the use of the RCCP program. Since P.S. 24 has provided their students with an SEL program, the school has received an “A” grading and an Excellence Award for progress in English, Language Arts and Mathematics. The school has also been rated “outstanding” and “exemplary” in closing the achievement gap by the New York City Department of Education.

Daniel Goleman (1995) cites, "In the United States many districts and even entire states currently make SEL a curriculum requirement, mandating that just as students must attain a certain level of competence in math and language, so too should they master these essential skills for living." (p. X) The statistics supporting the effects of social and emotional learning programs continues to increase throughout the nation by evidence of multiple surveys and IQ tests. One particular survey conducted by Roger Weissberg showed that SEL programs were a benefit in academic performance. "In participating schools, up to 50 percent of children showed improved achievement scores, and up to 38 percent improved their grade point averages. SEL programs also made schools safer: incidents of misbehavior dropped by an average of 28 percent; suspensions by 44 percent; and other disciplinary actions by 27 percent. At the same time, attendance rates rose, while 63 percent of students demonstrated significantly more positive behavior." (Goleman, 1995, p. xi)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL (2011), is an organization whose mission is to establish social and emotional learning as an essential part of education. Recently, CASEL conducted a metacognitive analysis of schools, families and community interventions that promote social and emotional development in children ages 5-18. The reviews indicated that SEL programs, "are effective in both school and after-school settings and for students with and without behavioral and emotional problems; are effective for racially and ethnically diverse students from urban, rural, and suburban settings across the K-12 grade range; improve students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, and positive social behavior; and reduce conduct problems and emotional distress;

improve students' achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points." (Meta-Analysis section) The reviews also assessed the efficiency of SEL programs when taught by teachers and the simplicity of incorporating these skills into the curriculum.

Roger Weissberg (2005) conducted the largest quantitative analysis with more than three hundred research studies on the effects of social and emotional learning programs. "The review shows, for example, that an average student enrolled in a social and emotional learning program ranks at least 10 percentile points higher on achievement tests than students who do not participate in such programs...that children who are given clear behavioral standards and social skills, allowing them to feel safe, valued, confident and challenged, will exhibit better school behavior and learn more to boot." (p. A15)

What this proves is that we as educators need to ensure that every student is being provided with adequate emotional and social instruction. As teachers our goal is to provide every child with the academic ability to succeed in life. Why, if we are given the statistics that they can achieve more, are we not teaching them emotionally and socially to succeed as well?

According to Linda Lantieri (2008), "The best social and emotional learning programs in schools are designed to fit seamlessly into the standard school curriculum for children at every age." (p. 3) In order to incorporate social and emotional learning into a school's curriculum, SEL beliefs need to be addressed in the mission statement. The Nueva School in San Francisco demonstrates the importance of including SEL in their mission statement. "The Nueva School, located in the San Francisco Bay Area and founded in 1967, is a nationally recognized independent school serving gifted and talented students. Nueva is a child-centered, Pre-K to 8th grade, progressive school



emphasizing integrated studies, creative arts, and social-emotional learning. Nueva offers a constructivist program, project-based learning, and special-area teachers in visual art, reading, math, science, music, physical education, technology, and social-emotional learning. Nueva teachers work in teams to develop thematic curricula for their classes.” The Nueva School provides classes in social and emotional learning where specialized teachers come into the classroom once a day to teach SEL skills.

Once a school incorporates SEL into their mission statement, there should be a direct link between the school’s beliefs and that of their faculty. The mission statement should be the driving force for teacher methods, as well as student behavior and curriculum. When SEL programs are implemented into classrooms through academic curriculum, teachers, and students there is a significant shift in a school’s climate. It is crucial for schools to recognize that there are teachers who shy away at the idea of SEL, citing that it’s non-academic or it’s too emotionally explosive. These viewpoints are typically based on comfort level. However, the more resources and techniques teachers are exposed to, the more comfortable and supportive they may become towards SEL programs.

Students need to have interpersonal and intrapersonal lessons within their academic curriculum. Small group work is a dynamic used often in the classroom, however, it can be quite challenging for individual students. Students that struggle socially or are strong willed have a difficult time interacting in small group work; either they struggle to be heard or dominate the conversation. Cultivating interactions that are based in small group work is one of the best teacher methodologies when promoting social and emotional learning. Teachers should demonstrate the fundamental tools when

working in groups. Some of these tools include, taking risks, having fun, reflecting and appreciating work, recognizing when behavior is escalating and knowing how to stop it, and being able to express oneself through the use of I-statements.

The Nueva School provides an institute on a yearly basis for teachers and administration to learn about incorporating SEL into their curriculum. At the Nueva School SEL Institute 2011, teachers generated a list of interpersonal and intrapersonal questions to promote student awareness of their thoughts, feelings and actions related to group work.

- How much did you worry about your partners' impression of you and did it affect your performance? Why or why not?
- Share one compliment and one piece of feedback with your partner using the frame: "It really helped me when..." and "Next time you may want to try..."
- What did you do to encourage others or help them continue to contribute?
- Did the way you worked together motivate or un-motivate you? Why?

These questions are just a few examples of how teachers can encourage positive reflection and appreciation of group work. When students are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences the chances of them becoming empathic toward their peers increases. Students can also gain a positive, assertive voice when expressing their thoughts and feelings. Appreciation and acknowledgement through the use of emotional processing questions at the end of an assignment or class is a simple teacher method that is crucial to providing students with social and emotional intelligence.

Group work in an SEL program doesn't remain solely in the classroom. It's important for students to be part of small group advisory programs. Advisory programs, led by a teacher, are small groups of mixed grade students who discuss issues pertinent to their growth as students and set personal goals. This type of advisory program provides students the opportunity to share experiences and learn from peers across grade levels. Service learning or community service should be an ongoing project that enables students to reflect on their social and emotional learning all year long. By providing support to the surrounding community students will have the opportunity to extend their SEL skills such as empathy, communication, compassion, resilience and leadership to the world outside of school.

All SEL programs use repetition of social and emotional skills learned throughout individual grade levels. Janice Toben and Elizabeth McLeod from the Nueva School SEL Institute 2011 provide, "The Toolbox for Grades 1-8." The following timeline demonstrates how different activities and tools can provide students with kindness, inclusion, well-being, communication, peace, self-advocacy, mindfulness, integrity, respect, empathy, responsibility, cooperation, compassion, resilience and leadership.

Check - In → Empathy

Active Listening → Reflective Listening → Open Mindset

I - Statements → Assertive Voice

Win - Win Solutions → Group Problem Solving

Cool Off Escalator → Checking Assumptions & Forgiveness

Emotional Thermometer → Equanimity & Personal Decision Making

Appreciations → Acknowledgement & Gratitude

Put - Ups → Encouragement

Boundary Bubble → Personal Boundaries

Relaxation → Stress Management

The following activities and tools have been provided by the Nueva School SEL Institute 2011 and demonstrate the ease in which social and emotional learning can be incorporated into the classroom.

### *Check-In*

(Rush Sabiston Frank, 2009)

Intended for All Ages

Check-in is an activity used at the beginning of a class, meeting or advisory period to calm down, listen to others and reflex on one's mind and body. The purpose is for students to acknowledge how they're feeling in the current moment. This activity provides students with the opportunity to become aware of their own feelings as well as the feelings of others. Teachers should remind students that during this activity it's important to listen to their peers and remember that everyone is entitled to their feelings and opinions.

Students are asked to respond to a "rating scale" from 1-10, 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. Students go around the room and have the opportunity to share their response to check-in with a number; a number and reason or they can pass if they don't feel like sharing. It is important for teachers to participate as well creating a cohesive group environment.

Themed check-ins can be used with middle school students and higher. Themed check-ins are scales from 1-10 that have a corresponding theme. For example, 1= rotten

cherries, 2 = mushy bananas...7 = white peaches and 10 = watermelon. Students are asked to check-in using their peer's rating scale. These themes are chosen by individual students, making them their own and can be as creative as they choose. Themed check-ins can be revealing about a student's life and community. It also provides other students the opportunity to learn more about what their peers like and dislike.

### *Open Session*

(Janice Toben and Rush Sabiston Frank, 2009)

Intended for Middle School and High School Students

In an open session, students respond to their peers by generating issues through an intentional, supportive exchange of listening and ideas. This opportunity allows students to offer their personal wisdom, advice, or clarification to guide their peers to a healthy resolution to everyday problems. This activity provides students with a safe environment to "test" their moral and developmental thinking through peer driven conversation. The facilitator role is to read the student's viewpoints that have been written on index cards, anonymously or students can "own" the issue. An open session is made up of 10 to 25 students and lasts about 30-35 minutes. It is crucial that ground rules be laid out for students prior to the open session and the first few minutes should begin with a check-in to promote emotional awareness.

The ground rules for open session revolve around confidentiality. Students cannot share topics with other students in the school. The conversations that happen during an open session remain solely in the open session and are not discussed outside the room.

There are no specifics, such as names allowed. Students need to also respect the content of the discussion and actively listen to their peers.

The facilitator is there to provide the types of issues that can be addressed, such as personal decisions and challenges, social and friendship struggles or upcoming events or family dynamics. They also describe the three ways in which the student can respond. Students may ask for clarification using sentence starters such as, "I wonder if..." however clarifying questions are not about the response. The purpose of clarification is for the writer to think about a different viewpoint. Students may provide support and encouragement by saying, "In my experience..." or "I'm sorry that happened..." or even "That sounds difficult..." Lastly, students can offer wisdom or insight by saying, "You might want to try..." or "I've heard people use..." The facilitator monitors the responses of students, but does not provide insight into the situation.

Students gain direct practice in the life skill of positive communication and active listening during an open session. They also build confidence and resilience in coping with the personal and social conflicts that trigger stress that can impact their daily lives in and out of school. Finally, students are provided with the experience of creating a pro-active, sensitive, respectful and inclusive community.

*Hidden Voices*

(Janice Toben and Rush Sabiston Frank, 2009)

Intended for Grades 1-5+

Hidden voices explores the internal messages, supportive and encouraging or unkind and critical, that we send to ourselves. The goal is for students to examine the ways in which self-encouragement and self-criticism can take hold of the individual thought process. Students learn to challenge the internal critical voice so that they can be open to learning and being creative. This activity promotes well-being, personal decision-making and mindfulness.

The teacher introduces the supporting voice as the little voice inside that cheers us on and is encouraging. Students are asked to consider in what situations their supportive voice may present itself. The supportive voice might say, "I've studied hard and am ready for the test," or "I've practiced my violin and will play well in the recital." Students are asked to imagine what this hidden voice would look like, how big would it be, if it cartoon-like, realistic, if it a fantasy with a vivid color?

The teacher will then introduce the critical voice, which is often based in anger and frustration. This voice can be discouraging, blaming and usually criticizes our actions, thoughts and feelings. An example of the critical voice may be, "You'll never learn all your multiplication facts, why try?" Students are asked when this hidden voice might present itself, what it may look like, what size it is, if it's realistic and what color it may be.

The teacher can offer some scenarios and ask the students what their critical voice might say. For example, when I forget my homework my critical voice might say... After students have the opportunity to respond to the scenario using the critical voice, the teacher will direct the students to respond in their supportive voice. At the end of the activity, the teacher should ask reflective processing questions such as,

- Which “hidden voice” do you find yourself listening to most frequently?
- Sometimes students think the critical voice is helpful to them. Why might this be so?
- Will you change any thoughts or behaviors because of this lesson? If yes, in what ways?

*The Questing Shield Experience*

(Janice Toben and Jo-An Vargo, 2010)

Intended for Grades 4-5+

The questing shield experience is designed to increase the sense of self-pride and identity by exposing students to new personal goals and metaphors. This activity also increases sensitivity toward individual preferences and differences among a group of students. This experience promotes well-being, personal decision-making and mindfulness.

Students are asked to draw a shield-like shape with five sections that will represent a different characteristic that is personal to them. It may be helpful to provide students with examples of different shields and acknowledge the numerous ways to divide the sections. First, students will choose one animal whose character and strengths they admire and would like to emulate. For example, a student may choose the power of a lion, the determination of a beaver, the beauty of a butterfly or the playfulness of a dolphin. Next, students will choose one person whose love, wisdom and support they use



to strength and guide them. This person could be someone they respect and admire, a friend or family member, a personal hero or heroine or a historical or fictional character.

In the third section, students will choose one personal strength that helps them through good and bad times. Examples may include, a sense of humor, intelligence, perseverance, friendliness, self-confidence, helpfulness, sensitivity or dependability.

Next, students will choose one personal weakness that they must work on to accomplish their goals successfully. A weakness might be, lack of confidence, stubbornness, laziness, fear, jealousy, shyness, prejudices or disorganization. Lastly, students are to choose one important issue or principle in which they strongly believe. This is the hardest section for students and it may be helpful to pull from curriculum or media events.

*UNAFRAID: The Assertive Voice*

(Janice Toben, 2010)

Intended for Grades 4-5+

The assertive voice is an activity consisting of two different parts. The purpose of this exercise is to promote positive communication and conflict resolution. The first part of this activity is about awareness in communication. The teacher will place a continuum on the board or a large piece of paper. One end of the line is labeled, "passive" and the other end is labeled, "aggressive." The middle is labeled, "assertive." All forms of communication can be less stressful and more successful if we understand the difference between these three styles of speaking: passive, aggressive and assertive. It is important that we receive messages in communication with an open mindset.

The teacher briefly explains the three styles by demonstrating or role-playing starting with passive, then aggressive and lastly, assertive.

**Passive**

Body Language: Head down, eyes darting or down, shoulders shrugged

Words and Tone: Lots of umms and maybes and hope so...

Thoughts: Think to self: It's too difficult to get my point across; they may not like me.

**Aggressive**

Body Language: Threatening posture; physically too close to the other person

Words and Tone: Blaming; escalating; name-calling; unforgiving; "You always," sarcastic or mocking tone

Thoughts: I don't care what this person says, I'm right and I will get my way.

**Assertive**

Body Language: Grounded with feet firmly planted toward the person you are communicating with; eye contact; head and shoulders are upright

Words and Tone: Clear; direct; polite but firm; strong voice

Thoughts: I have the power and courage to ask for this. I am strong and fair.

As each style is demonstrated, ask the students to share what they are noticing about body language, words and tone of voice as well as what they think the communicator is saying to him or herself (internal dialogue). List the student responses under the continuum.

Below are some examples for role-playing:

1. Your friend borrowed your book for much longer than she said she would and you really need it back!

2. You're getting your hair cut and the stylist has already started cutting it much shorter than you wanted it to be.
3. You need to get another homework paper from your teacher. This is not the first time this has happened.

After all three styles are demonstrated, explain that assertive communication is easier said than done and requires much self-awareness, patience and active confidence. The assertive voice can be learned and will be a powerful tool for them in all of their future relationships. Provide students with the notion that even adults have not often mastered this skill and that it takes a lot of patience. Emphasize that assertiveness is not "being mean" it is being direct, confident and standing up for one's self.

Part two of this exercise allows the students to role-play with a partner. Students will take turns being the message sender and the receiver. Practice passive and aggressive styles for contrast, but spend most of the time on the assertive style.

Remember:

- ✓ Uphold your own needs and boundaries
- ✓ Nice?
- ✓ Avoid "mushy" words like "umm," "I'll try," "maybe" or "I guess."
- ✓ Firm. Hold your position and/or seeing the other person's view.
- ✓ Re-focus the conversation to the positive if the receiver tries to pull it to the aggressive or negative.
- ✓ Ask for what you need or want. Ask seriously.
- ✓ I – messages: I feel...when you...and I need...
- ✓ Don't give up. Get a teacher or parent.

Below are examples for student role-play situations:

1. A friend keeps joking with you by trying to trip you as you walk up the steps. It might have been funny at first to both of you, but now it is definitely not funny to you. Your friend keeps doing it.
2. A classmate begs and begs for your potato chips at lunch until you feel compelled to give in.
3. You want to play with someone who won't play with you. Their reason upsets you: he/she doesn't want you to include another person that you like to play with.
4. A classmate borrowed your calculator and hasn't returned it yet. You really need it back for your math test tomorrow and you've been forgiving about their forgetting it twice already.

Most of the above activities and exercises are used to develop self-awareness in relation to others, promote empathy and communicating effectively. Mindfulness is an additional part of the social and emotional learning curriculum that focuses on the individual and promotes self-awareness and self-management. Mindfulness can be defined as focusing the mind on the present as well as observing thoughts and feelings without judging them to be good or bad.

According to Linda Lantieri (2008), "Hundreds of studies have been published, some in peer-reviewed journals, of the benefits (in particular) of the claming technique called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn..." (p. 14) In a study conducted by Kabat-Zinn, one group was taught mindfulness techniques,

body scans, and yoga and practiced these regularly for three months. After the three-month study, the group "...showed a 46% decrease in psychological distress; and a 24% reduction in the stress response to everyday hassles. The control group (who did not practice mindfulness techniques) showed no significant change in their levels of stress." (Lantieri, 2008, p. 14) This study provides insight into the importance of teaching children basic mindfulness techniques. Children can learn breathing techniques, guided imagery or relaxing the body through yoga poses or muscle relaxation to enhance focus and decrease stress.

When mindfulness techniques are practiced on an ongoing basis, even for a minute a day, they can become easy to access tools when needed. By practicing positive calming or grounding techniques as part of a daily routine, children are more likely to remember these strategies when they feel stressed or overwhelmed. Meditation has become an interesting topic in relation to brain research and social and emotional learning. According to Sindya N. Bhanoo (2011), "The researchers (scientists) report that those who meditated for about 30 minutes a day for eight weeks had measurable changes in gray-matter density in parts of the brain associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress." (Health section) As discussed early, this gray matter can be found within the hippocampus, which impacts a child's ability to learn as well as in the amygdala, which is associated with anxiety and stress.

Bhanoo's article discusses the findings of Britta Holzel a psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. According to Holzel, mindfulness meditation encompasses the use of "different objects to focus one's attention, and it could be a focus on sensations of breathing, or emotions or thoughts, or

observing any type of body sensations, but it's about bringing the mind back to the here and now, as opposed to letting the mind drift." (Bhanoo, 2011, Health section)

Mindfulness meditation provides focus and attention in individuals, which is a useful technique for adults and children alike. This mental exercise can be integrated into the curriculum for as little as five minutes a day with powerful benefits.

Daniel Goleman, the author of *Emotional Intelligence*, was interviewed in 1999 about the effects of meditation and the brain in a Tricycle magazine article. Tricycle magazine is an independent public forum to explore Buddhist teachings and practices, such as meditation, without affiliating with any particular lineage of Buddhist beliefs. Goleman was asked if he had studied the effects of meditation in children, "No. But we know that meditation shapes the brain, and you can conjecture that it gives people quite an advantage if they do it earlier in life, when the brain is being formed, rather than later." (Van Roojen, 1999, p. 77) Although Goleman was predicting what meditation in children could initiate later in life, it's important to recognize the effects meditation can have on crucial areas of the brain for developing children.

The following techniques and activities have been provided by the Nueva School SEL Institute 2011 and demonstrate the ease in which mindfulness and meditation can be incorporated into the classroom.

*Guided Imagery: The Beach*

(Julie Lusk, 2010)

Intended for Grades 1-5+

Using the following script, children will relax by taking an imaginary journey along a beach, listening to the birds, waves and watching a sunset.

*Make yourself as comfortable as possible. Close your eyes. Now take a few deep breaths, taking the air in through your nose, holding it momentarily...and then slowly exhaling through your mouth...and with each exhale, you will find yourself relaxing more and more deeply, more and more completely.*

*Take the air in and let the air out. Allowing yourself to relax...relax...relax...*

*In a few moments, I am going to describe a very vivid scene in which you will picture yourself walking along a beach. You may wish to imagine this scene, as though you are there experiencing not only the sights, but the sounds, smells, tastes and textures.*

*It is a bright summer day. It is late in the day. You decide to go for a walk along the beach. The sun is radiating warmth and comfort as it shines boldly. Feel the warmth on your shoulders. The sky is crystal clear without a cloud in sight. The sand beneath your feet warms the soles of your feet. The sound of the waves beating against the shore echoes in the air.*

*You feel the warm, light breeze brush against your face as you walk onward. Far off in the distance, you can hear the cries of sea gulls...you watch them glide through the sky, swoop down into the sea, and then fly off once again.*

*As you walk further along the shore, you decide to rest. You sit down on a mound of sand and gaze out at the sea, staring intently at the rhythmic, methodical motion of the waves rolling onto shore.*

*Each wave breaks against the coast...rises slowly upward along the beach, leaving an aura of white foam, and then slowly retreats back out to sea, only to be*

*replaced by another wave that crashes against the shore...works its way up the beach...then slowly retreats back out to sea.*

*With each motion of the wave as it glides in and as it glides out, you find yourself feeling more and more relaxed, more and more calm.*

*The waves are flowing in...and the waves are rolling out...you feel more and more calm...continue to watch the waves glide in...and out.*

*Now, as you stare off into the distance, you see that the sun is beginning to sink into the horizon. The sun is sinking down and you feel more and more relaxed as you see its movement going down.*

*The sky is turning brilliant colors of red...orange...yellow...green...blue...purple...as the sun sets, sinking down...down...down...into the horizon, you feel very relaxed and soothed. You watch the sun as it sinks into the horizon.*

*The beating of the waves, the smell and taste of the sea, the salt, the cries of the gulls, the warmth against your body-all these sights, sounds and smells leave you feeling very soothed, very calm, very serene.*

*(Pause)*

*In a few moments, I will count from one to ten. When I reach the count of ten, slowly stretch and come back to the present moment in the classroom.*

#### *Guided Imagery: The Ally Within*

*(From Spinning Inward: Using Guided Imagery with Children for Learning, Creativity & Relaxation, Maureen Murdock, 1987)*



Intended for Grades 1-5+

Using the following script, children will relax by imagining an ally from within, who provides safety and comfort.

*Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath moving in...and...out...as you continue to breathe at your own rate, imagine that you are on a path in a very thick forest. All around you are beautiful green trees, and you walk down this path toward the sound of water. You come upon a small stream, and you walk over to the stream and look at your reflection in the water.*

*(Pause)*

*Soon you feel another presence standing next to you, and you feel completely safe. You see another reflection join yours in the water. This other presence may be that of an old, wise being, an animal, or an imaginary being who you feel is your ally, someone whom you have known for a long time, and someone whom you can trust. Your ally beckons to you to follow across a small bridge that crosses the stream. You follow and find yourself climbing a hill that leads to a cave. Your ally enters the cave, sits down, and gestures for you to follow. You enter the cave and sit down, and your ally begins to tell you about yourself.*

*(Pause 1 minute)*

*You may have a particular question you wish to ask your ally, and you do that now. You listen closely to the answer.*

*(Pause 1 minute)*

*Your ally tells you that you may return at any time you wish. He or she will always be there, waiting for you to help you with anything that you need. You thank your*

*ally, walk back down the path over the bridge, looking once again at your reflection in the water. You notice how you feel as you walk up the path, out of the forest, and become aware of sitting here fully present. Count to three to yourself and slowly open your eyes.*

*Pranayama (Breath work)*

(Adapted from Asana Alphabet, Ann Robideaux, 2010)

Intended for all ages

Pranayama, or breathing exercises, are especially helpful to calm down children, getting them to focus on vital parts of their lives. Children should not practice breathing techniques for as long as adults can. Often, five seconds may be plenty for children ages 2-5 while you may increase to twenty-thirty seconds as children reach age 6/7. Three to five minutes can be used with middle and upper school students and is encouraged. The idea is to introduce the concepts and techniques and increase the ability to focus on a single, simple task. By controlling one's breath, you can keep yourself calm in any situation.

*Long Deep Breath-* Breathing through the nose, inhale and fill the lungs completely, exhale and empty them out. Spine tall, shoulders relaxed. Notice how you can move the belly rather than have breath caught in the chest.

*Balloon Breath-* Blow up a real balloon and ask students to watch to see what happens when the breath is under control. Now if we do not have control of our breath, watch what happens (let go of the balloon). The organ that helps us breath is something like a balloon and it's called the lungs. Place your hands on the side of your lungs and see

how when you breathe in they fill up and when you breathe out they deflate. Inhale and open your arms wide/exhale and let your arms come back in with control. Repeat by crouching on the exhale and standing up stretched out on the inhale.

*Alternate Nostril Breathing*- Strongly recommended for middle and upper school students, this can be more of a challenge for younger children. Begin by blocking just one nostril at a time. With mastery, inhale left/exhale right, inhale right/exhale left.

*Panting*- Good for the immune system and detoxification. Stick out the tongue and pant like a dog.

*Hissing*- Inhale through the nose and exhale with a hissing sound. This induces relaxation and is a good tool for refocusing in class.

Scientists have done research in order to discover a link between the positive effects of meditation and the brain. In the book *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain* by Sharon Begley, scientists worked with the Dalai Lama to find any long-term effects meditation can have on the brain. "...Meditation and other forms of mental training can, by exploiting the brain's neuroplasticity, produce changes—most likely in patterns of neuronal activation, but perhaps even in the structure of neural circuitry in the sense of what's connected to what and how strong those connections are—that underlie enduring happiness and other positive emotions." (Begley, 2007, p. 221) If this is true; the brain has the potential to change its wiring. Ultimately, individuals and therapists would have the ability to restore the brain and promote emotional health.

Richard J. Davidson's, a scientist from the *Lab for Affective Neuroscience*, research into the effects of meditation and the brain concluded, "...that the mental

training that lies at the core of meditative practice can alter the brain and thus the mind in an enduring way—strengthening connections from the thoughtful prefrontal lobes to the fear- and anxiety-generating amygdala, shifting activity in the prefrontal cortex from the discontented right side to the eudaemonic left side. Connections among neurons can be physically modified through mental training just as a biceps can be modified by physical training.” (Begley, 2007, p. 241) This conclusion supports the idea that a mentally trained brain through the act of meditation can be emotionally healthy. It’s powerful to know that by identifying and controlling our emotions and mental events as they arise, we can train our brains to become healthy, calm individuals.

Children can be taught to practice the variation of meditation, known as mindfulness. There are two ways in which children can learn to be mindful and train their brains to be emotionally healthy. The ability to ignore negative, judgmental thoughts and focus on the moment is described by the Dalai Lama in the book, *Destructive Emotions* narrated by Daniel Goleman. “... You must be mindful and aware in the moment when you see the image, hear the sound, or come into contact with any tangible object. If you can hone mindfulness and awareness, then you will see the color or sound as it is—you will not think about whether that something is good or bad, whether it’s a beautiful picture or a very ugly picture, a sweet sound or an ugly sound. When you act like this, your mind will stay very calm. No negative emotion that could harm you will come to you.” (Goleman, 2004, p. 170)

The Dalai Lama continues to address the act of mindfulness, “...another aspect of mindfulness, concentration, in which the focus stays on a neutral object of awareness, typically the natural flow of the breath, and so wards off destructive emotions by

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