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Social and Emotional Learning in Education Cohort

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Abstract

The paper examines social and emotional learning (SEL) in one teacher education cohort based on 10 learning activities. Findings reveal that candidates engaged in SEL competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills in the activities. Implications include mapping teacher education curriculum and instruction that foster candidate growth in each SEL competency. Also, candidate discussions of their engagements in SEL activities may be used to interpret their levels of adult development that may bring deep insights into candidate identity.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The study explores SEL in a K-12 teacher education cohort as viewed by teacher candidates who engage in 10 learning activities. SEL is composed of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). These SEL competencies focus on the abilities of individuals to “acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make positive decisions” (Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013, p. 12).

The theoretical framework is based on constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1994). Accordingly, teacher candidates are seen as adult learners capable of thinking abstractly, reflecting on their own emotions, and maintaining loyalty to others. A teacher education cohort is viewed as a ‘holding environment’ for supporting, challenging, and sustaining members over time based on each candidate’s developmental stage. The adult learner stages include: instrumental knowers, socializing knowers, and self-authoring knowers (Drago-Severson, 2004). Instrumental knowers view the group context as a space for sharing ideas with peers. Socializing knowers support one-another and seek to avoid conflict in their social interactions. Self-authoring knowers do “not experience conflict as a threat to their sense of cohesion with others” (Drago-Severson, 2004, p. 20). These learners are committed to their relationships and view their connections with others, including those that may be challenging or contentious, as a means to advance learning for themselves and others.

The study seeks to shed light on the relationship among candidates’ perceptions of classroom activities and SEL outcomes. The research questions guiding this inquiry are:

1) To what extent do cohort learning activities impact candidates in any of the five SEL competencies?

- 2) What sense do candidates make of teacher preparation instruction aimed at promoting SEL?
- 3) To what degree do candidates relate the impact of SEL upon their pedagogical beliefs and practices?
- 4) How can teacher educators best apply SEL in teacher preparation programs?

Methods

The SEL seminar activities (found in Table 1) were part of regular cohort instruction during the first semester of a two-year teacher preparation program. The cohort contained sixteen candidates pursuing initial teacher licensure and a master's degree.

Activity Name	Activity Description (with citation as appropriate)
Autobiographical Object Talk	Three minute self-sharing presentation to entire cohort based on a personally relevant artifact and the symbolic meaning of the artifact in the life of the cohort member
Frogs and Moths	Cultural bias simulation activity whereby cohort members are arbitrarily assigned roles with varying levels of resources and instructions to complete task (Baldwin & Evanstad, 2010)
Toobeez: Find Your Way	Step pattern maze game conducted by entire cohort as candidates search for a path through floor maze without speaking (Kies & Liederman, n.d.)
Assumptions Game	Pair-share discussion of race and ethnic stereotypes (Mun Wah, 2015)
Blind Maze Trust Game	Pairing activity with one blindfolded partner being guided by a seeing partner through an obstacle maze (Roberts, 2005)
Stroll-Pair-Share	Pair-share discussion with candidates walking outside of the seminar room while discussing personal identity and culture (Kagan & Kagan, 2009; Parker & Howard, 2009)
Appreciations	Written compliment of another cohort member based on an animal analogy reference
Self-Affirmation Writing	Solo writing assignment with prompt addressing positive self-identity attributes (Robinson, 2014)
BFK Stretch Game	Classroom scenario discussion card game played in teams of 3-5 cohort members (BattelleforKids, 2013)
Privilege Walk	Privilege/oppression awareness game with questions on identity including race, class, and gender (Young, 2006)

The researcher employs a Quan-QUAL mixed methods design to construct quantitative data initially and qualitative data later to explain, elaborate, and clarify results (Creswell, 2014; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006). Quantitative data (Phase I) consisted of select-response Likert-like scale items on a questionnaire (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Questionnaire outcomes generated inquiry topics for the focus group discussion and interviews. Research participants were encouraged to elaborate, clarify, confirm, and question claims emanating from the questionnaire findings in a manner that guided conversations during the focus group meeting and interviews.

Qualitative data (Phase II) consisted of an hour-long focus group discussion with six cohort members. A discussion guide was used to invite and encourage participant conversations addressing the relationship of 10 cohort learning activities and SEL competencies. Following the focus group discussion, two 45-minute, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with each of three candidates. An interview guide was used to foster conversations based on SEL and cohort activities. Interview audio recordings were transcribed to text and comprise the interview data.

Results

Cohort activities most aligned with SEL included Stroll-Pair-Share, Blind Maze Trust Game, and Privilege Walk. Self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills were the best addressed SEL competencies.

Research Question 1: To what extent do cohort learning activities impact candidates in any of the five SEL competencies?

Candidate A focused on social awareness and the importance of the Privilege Walk to understand others and herself. Candidate A felt that an open and honest engagement with others was essential for good teaching. In Candidate A's words, "If you can't be open and honest, you can't be part of the learning process with them [*students*]." In further discussion about social awareness, this candidate mentioned that during "deep discussion, we can feel like I don't want to disagree with someone because it could become a fight and be messy." This comment is consistent with Kegan's (1994) 3rd Order Level of Adult Development premised on Socializing Knowers (Drago-Severson, 2004).

Further into the interview when speaking about conflict, Candidate A said:

How important is it to stay away from conflict? Super important. I mean conflict is good in a positive way. If you have conflicting views, then it is good to have a discussion, but when you have a conflict and it becomes vicious or negative then it becomes not beneficial. Conflict is good when you can see different perspectives, and you can come into a discussion where you can prove or show them this is where you are coming from and learn where they are coming from is beneficial

Based on this comment, this candidate may be transitioning from 3rd to 4th order levels of adult development. Another comment that may indicate a transition to 4th order Self-Authentic Knowing was apparent when this candidate noted that when in conflict with others, the best thing to do is apply a form of social and self-awareness to ask internal dialogue questions such as: "What does this mean about the way that I see them? And what does that say if I didn't agree with them."

Candidate B suggested that social awareness and relationship skills were the SEL dimensions addressed in cohort activities. Inherent in the Stroll-Pair-Share activity was a sense of vulnerability as candidates spoke about their deeply-held personal beliefs regarding their own experiences with diversity . This candidate appeared to be at the socializing knower stage of development due to a fundamental concern about possibly offending others when speaking with them.

Candidate C commented that the Toobeez and Blind Maze activities were the best activities to promote SEL. These activities enhanced relationship skills since cohort members were accountable in achieving group goals. This candidate felt that it was important to support other cohort members. The social nature of achieving group goals was summarized in the African saying: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go farther, go together.” Self-Awareness was gained through the Autobiographical Object Talk. To a lesser extent, relationship skills were built through Frogs and Moths and Stroll-Pair-Share.

Candidate C believed that conflict could be beneficial since it was more likely to engage the emotions and make experience more meaningful. According to this candidate, “conflict in terms of fighting or arguing or debating disrespectfully is not good, but disagreeing respectfully is important and vital for having people work together for a similar topic for learning.” These comments from Candidate C reveal a self-authoring stage of adult development with trace elements of socialized knowing. This candidate believed that instructional practice was constructed through supportive and collaborative learning communities. Table 2 contains a summary of the interview candidates’ top SEL activities and levels of adult development.

Table 2. Candidate, Top SEL Activities/SEL Emphasis, and Level of Adult Development

Candidate	Top SEL Activities / SEL Emphasis	Level of Adult Development (Drago-Severson, 2004)
A	Privilege Walk / Social Awareness Autobiographical Object Talk / Self-Awareness Frogs & Moths / Self-Awareness	Level 3/4 (Socializing Knower) transitioning to Level 4 (Self-Authoring Knower)
B	Stroll-Pair-Share /Social Awareness & Relationship Skills	Level 3 (Socializing Knower)
C	Toobeez & Blind Maze Race / Social Awareness	Level 4(3) (Self -Authoring with trace of previous Socializing Knower)

Research Question 2: What sense do candidates make of teacher preparation instruction aimed at promoting SEL?

Candidate A felt that the Stroll-Pair-Share enhanced her belief that she was part of a community made of individuals who may be different yet interrelated. Accordingly, if individuals enter into the community with empathy and the goal of understanding one another, then SEL activities can

build social awareness based on relationship skills, self-management, and self-awareness. Candidate A suggested that it was important to “set up a classroom where people are part of SEL classroom . . . where they learn about self-awareness, self-management.”

Candidate B said that by having cohort activities promoting rich conversations, “we as a class could be successful because we could establish our relationships.” An essential aspect of establishing relationships was being vulnerable to others.

According to Candidate C, SEL activities could support candidates in helping them learn decision making skills and successful classroom practices when handling conflicts and challenges. For example, Candidate C said, “In the classroom, if I encountered a situation that I didn’t know how to handle, if a student says something inappropriate, I could talk to my cohort about that for support.”

Research Question 3: To what degree do candidates relate the impact of SEL upon their pedagogical beliefs and practices?

Candidate A remarked that the Assumptions Game impacted her beliefs regarding ethnicity. This candidate encountered another cohort member with an alternative ethnicity that forced her to challenge her previously held beliefs regarding how others view themselves and their worlds based on their ethnic identities.

Candidate B felt that self-management and relationship skills were important since social awareness was essential for teachers to better understand students. This candidate also wanted to belong to a team whereby each individual works to contribute to the team’s success and well-being. Participating in Frogs and Moths and the BFK Stretch Game gave this candidate insights into the importance of using classroom instruction promoting equity for all within the cohort team.

Candidate C believed that relationship skills and responsible decision making were the most salient SEL competencies that could be used to resolve conflict in a mutually satisfactory way resulting in building respect and trust. This occurred as each person was valued and respected in the cohort. As a candidate who wanted to build caring relationships in classrooms, SEL activities generating respect and trust were vital to support this candidate’s transition into teaching.

Research Question 4: How can teacher educators best apply SEL in teacher preparation programs?

Along with including community building SEL activities within the teacher education cohort, Candidate A suggested that individuals must enter the cohort with the desire to learn from one another. This candidate believed in the importance of reaching out to other cohort members and interacting with them to learn from one another. Candidate B recommended that elementary and secondary candidates collaborate in SEL activities like the stroll-pair-share. Candidate C suggested that more SEL activities emphasizing responsible decision making would support the learning of effective instruction.

Implications for Teacher Educators

Theme 1: Provide a variety of SEL cohort activities to target specific SEL dimensions

It may be helpful to map the teacher education curriculum and instruction to maximize candidate growth and development in each SEL competency. According to the focus group discussion, self-management and responsible decision making were not as clearly addressed as were self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills. Additionally, one of the interview candidates noted that more development in responsible decision making would have better addressed field-based challenges. Blind Maze Trust Game and BFK Stretch Game were seen as building responsible decision making. One way to address this SEL competency would have candidates writing their own BFK scenario prompts. This could be useful for differentiating candidate learning based on their prior experiences in schools including their field experiences. Self-management could be better addressed as a component of any given activity as candidates developed organizational skills and practices to properly complete tasks in a timely manner.

Theme 2: Candidate identity needs to be taken into consideration when aligning SEL objectives and activities

Although diverse demographic identity characteristics may exist among members of any learning community, cohort activities may be designed and implemented that meet the needs of all learners. For example, the Blind Maze Trust Game was perceived as a top ranked activity promoting SEL among elementary candidates yet it was not as highly prized among secondary candidates. This activity could be supplemented with a stroll-pair-share focused on diversity identity issues as secondary students ranked this activity higher than their elementary peers. Although both of these activities address relationship skills, the trust game promotes responsible decision making whereas the stroll-pair-share emphasizes self-awareness and social awareness.

Theme 3: Maintain social awareness of how candidates are perceiving cohort learning activities based on the SEL competencies

Teacher educators could use SEL competencies as candidate learning objectives. This could involve both formative and summative checks-for-understanding during and after instruction to make mid-course corrections to accommodate candidates' learning needs as well as inform on-going planning and preparation for future cohorts.

Theme 4: Help teacher candidates transition to higher levels of adult development through SEL activities

Just as Candidate A's interview transcripts reveal a transition from a socializing knower to a self-authoring knower, all candidates could be asked to reflect on how they deal with conflict both in and out of the classroom through creative and critical problem solving and decision making. Potential cohort learning activities could be screened to ensure that candidates collaborate through engaging practices that are culturally compatible with how they construct meaning and merge personal and professional elements of their identities in the context of their seminars and field experiences.

Conclusion

Cohort learning activities designed to address SEL competencies, like the Stoll-Pair-Share based on discussions of diversity and identity, may engage candidates' empathetic thinking and feeling

as they learn about the privileges and challenges that they and their cohort peers have faced. Critical reflections and conversations based on the SEL competencies in the supportive cohort community may help candidates gain a better understanding of themselves and others as they prepare to enter the rewarding and demanding world of teaching.

Endnotes

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