

Teaching SEL: Powering up students with social & emotional know-how

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“Emotions are what make us human. Make us real. The word ‘emotion’ stands for energy in motion. Be truthful about your emotions, and use your mind and emotions in your favor, not against yourself.” – Robert Kiyosaki, *Rich Dad Poor Dad*.

All aspects of schooling require social-emotional competency and a mastery of Executive Function. Yet, it is only recently that we have begun to question if and how kids learn these nuanced cognitive and affective skills, as well as how teachers teach them in K-12 education. One incredibly effective method to do this is by founding education in Social and Emotional Learning methods.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) states that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) “... is how children and adults learn to understand and manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” However, we cannot do justice to SEL without interconnecting its concepts with Executive Function, the set of mental skills that direct thoughts, behaviors, actions, and feelings to yield results based on goals identified by yourself, for yourself, and to serve the needs of your future-self. At its core, Executive Function is composed of many overlapping regulatory constructs such as self-control that engage the brain’s proactive, intentional system. Using this top-down system, one can handle interruptions or setbacks that arise during the goal-attainment process by responding appropriately, for the benefit of both the future-self and society at large.

There is a general agreement in the field of neuroscience and cognitive psychology that Executive Function is comprised of three pivotal components: Working Memory, Inhibitory Control, and Cognitive Flexibility. Not only are these components central to Executive Functioning, but it is important to highlight how they directly connect to SEL:

- First, in the learning context, managing social and emotional states requires a strong working memory to effectively process and keep track of the influx of information that one is presented with. This ensures that all relevant information can be used as a reference to guide one's internal feelings and external behaviors in light of one's goals.
- Secondly, it requires well-developed inhibition in order to delay personal gratification and instead work collaboratively in a social context to achieve goals that others might have.
- Finally, it relies on strong cognitive and emotional flexibility to develop new strategies to get through personal hardships, interpersonal conflicts, and the everyday hiccups of life.

In light of clear connections between Executive Function and SEL, let me illustrate how Executive Function, and the explicit training of these skills, is essential to making SEL approach a productive and effective learning tool. Let me provide an overview of CASEL's five pillars of Social and Emotional Learning, and demonstrate how each pillar explicitly relates to Executive Function skills:

1st Pillar of SEL: Self-Awareness

This describes the ability to accurately recognize one's thoughts and emotions and their collective influence on attitude, behavior, and action. Self-awareness hinges on Executive Functioning to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations as well as maintain flexibility, willpower, and a growth mindset to make self-change.

Benefit: A curriculum or teaching that fosters self-awareness produces a well-grounded sense of confidence and self-efficacy in learners of all ages.

2nd Pillar of SEL: Self-Management

This describes the ability to effectively regulate one's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviors in challenging situations. The essence self-management is Executive Function, as it requires controlling impulses, enforcing structure, organizing information, setting goals, and prioritizing actions to meet these goals.

Benefit: A curriculum or teaching practice that promotes self-management in children prepares them with the skills and insights to handle stress, redirect impulsivity through reflection, and activate motivations to work toward achieving personal, social, and academic goals.

3rd Pillar of SEL: Social Awareness

This describes the ability to take multiple perspectives and empathize with those from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and cultures. Social awareness relies on Executive Function in the form of cognitive flexibility, helping students activate internal and external emotional resources in order to cope with interpersonal differences.

Benefit: A curriculum or teaching practice that advocates for social awareness yields empathy, respect, and social-emotional perspective taking in learners of all ages, creating a patient and compassionate community.

4th Pillar of SEL: Relationship Skills

This describes the ability to establish and maintain sound and mutually rewarding relationships in the midst of a diverse learning context. Relationship skills that require high-caliber Executive Functioning include understanding the intent behind communication, listening actively, filtering out irrelevant information, building interpersonal emotional bonds, and engaging in collaborative conflict resolution.

Benefit: A curriculum or teaching that nurtures relationship skills, empowers a group of students to attain mutualized goals with an enlightened self-interest and with patience and harmony.

5th Pillar of SEL: Responsible Decision Making

This describes the ability to make meaningful deductions, constructive inferences, and respectful choices in personal, interpersonal, and social interactions based on the situational context, social norms, and consideration of moral and ethical standards. Strong Executive Functioning is required for responsible decision-making as students have to analyze complex situations and identify problematic components, subsequently using reflection as a tool to address these social and personal challenges and then evaluate the outcomes.

Benefit: A curriculum or teaching practice that nurtures responsible decision making ensures that students engage in a realistic assessment of the obvious, opaque or even unseen consequences that result from their actions, as well as of their influence on personal well-being and community welfare.

Given how intricately intertwined Executive Function is with SEL, students need a K-12 education that not only addresses their SEL needs explicitly and systematically but also promotes the development of their Executive Functioning. In doing so, careful attention must be paid to best practices that are informed by neuroscience of brain maturation and learning. However, in modern day curricula, core SEL competencies are often only taught implicitly. Also, in my experience, the parts of SEL and Executive Function that *are* explicitly

taught tend to focus on children's social-emotional difficulties as they relate to things like stress, social comparisons, or bullying, rather than focusing on deeper and more fundamental cognitive skills such as attention control, goal-setting, and self-motivation.

According to researchers Jacqueline Ancess, Bethany L. Rogers, DeAnna Duncan Grand, and Linda Darling-Hammond, Bronxdale High School in New York City³ is a prime example of SEL done well. In their case study on the high school, which uses an "inquiry-based" approach to learning that is grounded in the science of learning and development, the researchers highlight four innovative educational principles that distinguish Bronxdale from its peers.

- **Principle 1:** A positive school environment that supports student success along the developmental continuum.
- **Principle 2:** Support for the intentional development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills, mindsets, and habits.
- **Principle 3:** Curriculum designs and instructional strategies that support academic capacity, competence, efficacy, motivation, and metacognitive skills.
- **Principle 4:** Multi-tiered systems of support based on a shared developmental framework.

In highlighting how Bronxdale used these principles as a foundation to reshape its learning environment, the researchers show how employing an SEL-centered framework can allow for the transformation of any school into an empowered learning community.

In my work as a Speech-Language Pathologist, an Educational Consultant, and a specialist in Learning Disabilities, my curriculum design and implementation experience has ranged from creating afterschool programs, intense group training in clinical settings, running year-long professional development series for teachers, and creating a digital curriculum called ExQ® for middle and high school students.

ExQ® is a cloud-based, digital curriculum that individualizes and personalizes learning *how* to learn, specifically focusing on social-emotional and Executive Function skills. In this way, ExQ® is a product that is both grounded in an SEL approach and enhances Executive Functioning for every learner. As schools and educators are figuring out how to best transport in-class learning into the digital space, ExQ® has been providing game-based, coach-facilitated virtual learning for a year-and a half.

Here are the 5 main elements of ExQ®, all of which are grounded in an SEL approach:

- ExQ® has a curricular focus through games, coaching, error analysis, self-efficacy activities, and metacognitive reflection that incorporate all five pillars of SEL (Self-Awareness, Social-Awareness, Self-Management, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making).

- ExQ® has developed curricular designs and instructional strategies with a special metacognitive approach called the Mindful Examination of Thinking & Awareness (M-E-T-A™) to enhance academic competency, self-efficacy, motivation, and metacognitive skills.
- ExQ® was created to align with the missions of school by facilitating the intentional development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills, mindsets, and habits in their entire student body *and* creating ways to measure the gains made through that process.
- ExQ® measures, qualifies, and quantifies every single student’s behavior during their learning *how* to learn experience in games, as well as, in personalized lessons with a virtual coach. It provides teachers with four scores (Accuracy measure, Self-Awareness measure, Learning from Mistakes measure, and a Strategic Thinking measure), allowing them to gauge progress and compile classroom- or school-wide trends so that support can be even further personalized.
- Finally, ExQ®’s Teacher Training Portal provides guidelines to help build an “EF Culture” and a positive school environment based on shared developmental framework that pays careful attention to student success along the entire developmental continuum.

ExQ® aspires to help schools and educators foster a community in which children know how to be bold, push themselves for personal excellence, and have a desire to investigate their learning know-how with social-emotional maturity and a sense of purpose that serves something greater than themselves.

References:

1. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning - CASEL (casel.org)
2. The 3 Areas of Executive Function (understood.org)
3. Teaching the Way Students Learn Best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School (<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/social-and-emotional-learning-case-study-bronxdale-report>)