Social-Emotional Education and Waldorf Education

David S. Mitchell

Try to remember the days of September … and your school experiences. For the majority of us, what we were taught and what we remember from our school years present two different pictures. We sat through countless hours of lessons about common denominators and mitosis, about heliotropism and split infinitives, about world revolutions and the Industrial Revolution.

Our skills developed quietly in the background at a rate equal to our interest. In the foreground, like a guardian to a fortress, was our feeling-life. Our emotions set the stage for our learning. Early memories contain the many sweet recollections of childhood but also feelings of intimidation suffered on the playground, the loneliness we felt as we tried to figure out who we were, awkward, blundering moments with the opposite sex, victories and defeats, and the antagonism we felt toward adults who seemed so sure in their correctness. As we matured, perhaps, we swam in a sea of insecurity lifted by waves of hope. In this area of our life-education, we were often largely on our own.

We should not leave emotional education to chance, however, in a world in which cultural decay and the dominance of modern media have created toxic soul conditions in which today's children must fight to survive.

> In western societies the drift to greater individualism raises the question of the future social coherence and sustainability. The increase in family fragmentation with a dramatic rise in the divorce figures places new emotional strains on a child, faced with feelings of insecurity and risk over which they are powerless.[1]

Across our country, one in ten children suffers from a serious mental health disorder, and very few of them receive the help and services they need. A national survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported that eight percent of students in grades 9–12 tried to take their own lives, and seventeen percent reported "seriously considering" suicide. These troubling statistics reflect symptoms of a deep unhappiness afflicting children from all backgrounds.[2]

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The remedy to this soul-toxic condition is a strengthening of the self so that young people are able to emerge from adolescence as self-directed, emotionally stable, social beings. The task of providing this inner training once belonged to the community—to church, family, and neighborhood life. This is often not the case today, and schools are asked to fulfill these needs.

As humanity evolves we recognize the surge toward individualism, and we can glimpse the preparation for the emergence of the consciousness soul. It is a light streaming from the future and a pathway with no detour. In the future, we will experience the experience of others; we will be unable not to do this. In spiritual science this post-individualistic stage is referred to as development of the "spirit-self."[3] This higher soul state is predicated on emotional health and inner balance.

Social-Emotional Education

Cognitive researchers[4] point out that children's social-emotional development is as important as their intellectual and physical development. Our emotional life may also be called our life of instinct. It responds before thinking commences and it can even extinguish thinking. Children's emotional health affects their academic performance, and their academic performance affects their emotional health. In other words, depression, anxiety, and unhappiness impair school performance. Similarly, school failure contributes to emotional health problems.


António Damàsio

António Damàsio, a neuroscientist from the University of Southern California, researches the neurobiology of mind and behavior with emphasis on emotion, decision-making, memory, communication, and creativity. He has shown that, in the brain, emotions and thinking are not separate activities but constantly play into one another. "Emotion appears to be the support system without which the rational building process cannot work."[5] The prefrontal lobes of the brain, which are associated with emotional impulses, are also associated with working memory and learning.

Linda Lantieri puts it this way:

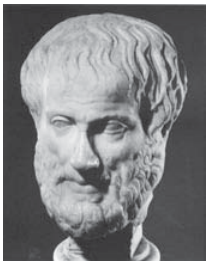
> Educators and parents alike are [becoming] much more aware that when chronic anxiety, anger, or upset feelings intrude on children's thoughts, less capacity is available in working memory to process what they are trying to learn. This implies that, at least in part, academic success depends on a student's ability to maintain positive social interactions.[6]

Children's social-emotional skills drive them to learn to communicate, to connect with others, to resolve conflict, and to cope with challenges. These skills give children the confidence they need to reach goals and the ability to persist in the face of life's difficulties. Like other important milestones that babies and toddlers achieve in their first three years—such as uprightness, walking, and talking—developing social-emotional skills takes time, practice, and patience of parents and teachers. In school, the first task of a wise teacher is to engage the "feeling-life" of the class in the subject being taught; this interest opens neural pathways to allow for cognition.

The champions of social-emotional inclusion claim an intellectual pedigree stretching back to Aristotle, who described emotional control and understanding as vital virtues. Aristotle wrote:

Humankind is by no means agreed about the things that ought to be taught, whether we look to virtue or the best life. Neither is it clear whether education is more concerned with intellectual or with moral virtue. The existing practice is perplexing; no one knows on what principle we should proceed—should the useful in life, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge be the aim of our training; all three opinions have been entertained.

Not all people have the same opinion about what youth should learn in order to develop a good character or to enable them to lead the best life. There is also no consensus about whether education should mainly focus on acquisition of knowledge and understanding or character formation, whether the right type of education should consist of disciplines useful for life, to breed a pure character, or to enlarge knowledge.[7]


Aristotle

Around ten percent of American grade school and high school students now receive some form of social and emotional learning curriculum, according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a Chicago-based emotional learning research organization.[8] Supporters point to a growing collection of studies that show the benefits of emotional learning programs on everything from test scores to lowered anxiety and lower rates of drug use. But the ultimate goal is something larger: a redefinition of what school is meant to teach and what sort of knowledge we value. Emotional literacy campaigners argue that the problems of the American school system will not be solved by getting youth to read sooner or training them to find the Okefenokee Swamp on a map—they need to better understand, and take charge of, their essential and unique human qualities.

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Daniel Goleman contributes significantly to views of education when he addresses the need to


Daniel Goleman

nurture the social and emotional lives of children. In *Emotional Intelligence* he summarizes research from the fields of neuroscience and cognitive psychology that identifies EQ (emotional intelligence) as replacing IQ, high-stakes testing, and College Board examinations in importance for children's development and future life success. He identifies five components that can be translated into essential social-emotional aptitudes:

1. Self-regulation—conducting ourselves and controlling our emotional states;
2. Self-consciousness—recognizing and understanding our feelings;
3. Motivation—managing feelings in order to achieve our objectives;
4. Empathy—identifying and decoding the feelings of others; and
5. Social Abilities—relating to and influencing others.[9]

Additionally, social-emotional education classes address five age-appropriate and essential areas of social and emotional development:

1. Self-awareness—recognizing our capacities, strengths, emotions, and values;
2. Self-management—managing emotions and behaviors, persevering in overcoming obstacles;
3. Social awareness—demonstrating understanding and empathy for others;
4. Relationship skills—forming positive relationships, teamwork, and conflict resolution; and
5. Responsible decision-making—making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior.

"The emotional mind is far quicker than the rational mind, springing into action without pausing even a moment to consider what it is doing," according to Goleman.[10] Students need to learn that they have the ability to make choices in how they respond to their individual emotions and they must learn to understand what these emotions are in order to lead richer lives. Goleman adds that students should learn

> self-awareness, in the sense of recognizing feelings and building a vocabulary for them, and seeing the links between thoughts, feelings, and reactions [thinking, feeling, and willing]. They should understand whether thoughts or feelings are ruling a decision and [be able to] see the consequence of alternative choices. They should be able to apply these insights to decisions about such issues as drugs, tobacco, and sex. Self-awareness also takes the form of recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, and seeing yourself in a positive but realistic light.
>
> Another emphasis in managing emotions [is] realizing what is behind a feeling (for example, the hurt that triggers anger), learning ways to handle anxieties, anger, and sadness, and following through on commitments.
>
> A key social ability is empathy, understanding others' feelings and taking their perspective, and respecting differences in how people feel about things. Relationships are a major focus, including learning to be a good listener and question asker, distinguishing between what someone says or does and your own reactions and judgments; being assertive rather than angry or passive; and learning the art of cooperation, conflict resolution, and negotiating compromise.[11]

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry sums up much of this in *The Little Prince*: "It is with the heart that one sees rightly: What is most essential is invisible to the eye."

Waldorf Education and Social-Emotional Learning

"Waldorf education encourages a balanced development toward physical, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual maturation."[12] Research on graduates of Waldorf schools has documented how the Waldorf school curricula already contain many of the attributes

of a strong social-emotional curriculum.[13] Still, we can do more. Schools must broaden the scope of the term "education" to give it its full meaning, and social-emotional education must be consciously taught. Resources are available, but, first, it is vital to understand child development; this is an area neglected in Goleman's work. Second, we may study our curricula in order to determine where emphasis can be placed to strengthen social-emotional skills. And, third, we may focus on the demographics of age-appropriate social-emotional development, which may vary from community to community.

Waldorf school curricula have much embedded within them to help form the moral will of students. "In the learning process, the creative-expressive, aesthetic dimension has a [secure] place alongside the dynamics of the data-driven, knowledge-based global society, because the arts provide a bridge that promotes the inner and outer health and well-being of the individual."[14] Rich stories and biographies of men and women provide mental images containing powerful ideals toward which our students may strive. Respectful teachers afford students an opportunity for moral imitation. We may speak without moralizing about the dangers of cigarette smoking during combustion experiments in 7th grade chemistry, for instance, as well as about depression and the physiological effects of alcohol during 8th or 9th grade chemistry. True relationships and responsibility are unfolded as requisites for sexual intimacy, and procreation is looked at with wonder.

Our students are in need of a more direct development of their social-emotional skills, especially once they reach high school. Parents may have been diligent and class teachers may have laid a strong moral foundation, but the influences of modern life, as experienced, for instance, through music, the cinema, and arrogant athletes, eat away at this foundation as a strong acid attacks metal.

> A teacher's love, an aesthetic environment, and a profound respect for awakening individuality in each student are the mortar to strengthen the education of modern human beings.

Empathy

At the foundational stage, social-emotional education concerns itself with acquiring self-knowledge. The words "know thyself" were inscribed in the *pronaos* (forecourt) of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and meta-cognition (awareness of thought process), meta-mood (awareness of one's own emotions), and self-awareness (the sense of an ongoing attention to one's internal states) were trained in the mystery school of Pythagoras. Situated in Crotona, a town next to the Gulf of Tarentum in southern Italy, the school was highly concerned with strengthening the morality of society. Members were required to live ethically, love one another, share political beliefs, practice pacifism, and devote themselves to the mathematics of nature. These timeless concepts return to humanity with the regularity of a merry-go-round and set the foundation for modern spiritual work as well as social-emotional education.

At the secondary stage, social-emotional education concerns itself with the cultivation of empathy—from my perspective the most important and necessary capacity for our times. Empathy is the "potential for holding still [the] eternal oscillation between sympathy and antipathy"[15] "…and in this deed of holding still, making a space, a gateway open[s] toward another person and toward [this person's] experience."[16] Thus we give up ourselves and begin to experience the other person's experience. The attainment of empathy is a condition for achieving total compassion. Thomas Weihs describes empathy as follows:

> While love is often impatient,
> empathy is patient.
> While love is often aggressive,
> empathy is kind.
> While love is often generous,
> empathy envies no one.
> Love is often proud,
> but empathy is never boastful nor conceited.

> While love is often selfish and very easy to take offense,
> empathy is never selfish and never takes offense.
> Empathy keeps no score of wrongs, nor does not gloat over
> other men's sins, but delights in the truth.
> There is nothing empathy cannot face,
> There is no end to its own faith, hope, and its endurance.[17]

Conclusion

Twenty-five years ago Waldorf high school teachers could enter a classroom and, so to speak, find the table set, as if in preparation for a wonderful meal. For the most part, students were relatively attentive, manners were exercised, and there appeared to be an eagerness to learn. When teachers enter a classroom today, they may well find they have first to set the table and meet the pressing emotional needs of the students before they can serve the meal—that is, teach the class. High school teachers in 2009 are often required to prepare students in a new manner before teaching can commence. This is not to say that they do not want to learn. Here, for example, Leo Tolstoy describes the torment of the underachieving pupil, Seryozha:

> The father and the teacher were both displeased with Seryozha, and indeed he studied very badly. But it was quite impossible to say that he was an incapable boy. On the contrary, he was much more capable than all the other boys. And, as his father saw it, he did not want to learn what he was taught. But in fact he could not learn it. He could not because there were demands in his soul that were more exacting for him than those imposed by his father and teacher. These demands were conflicting, and he fought openly with his educators.
>
> He was nine years old, he was a child, but he knew his own soul, it was dear to him, he protected it as the eyelid protects the eye, and did not let anyone into his soul without the key of love. His educators complained that he did not want to learn, yet his soul was overflowing with a thirst for knowledge.[18]

A teacher's love, an aesthetic environment, and a profound respect for awakening individuality in each student are the mortar to strengthen the education of modern human beings. Love is a force that will grant each young soul the strength to meet the rigors of the path to "knowing themselves." The chart on the next page gives ideas for the implementation of a Waldorf high school social-emotional curriculum.

A PROPOSED WALDORF SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL SKILLS CURRICULUM FOR HIGH SCHOOL

The high school Social/Emotional curriculum has two parts:
The first a weekly forum where guided discussions take place, sometimes with community experts.
The second is embedded in the curriculum as it unfolds – each teacher identifies the opportunities to bring forward.

	9	10	11	12
		Forums		
Soul Skills Needing Development	Discuss Physical boundaries (harassment) Develop a tolerance for differences Awaken empathy–recognize the good in everyone Ninth grade orientation Time management What is OK and what is not Transition–extrinsic to intrinsic Social exercises/Team building exercises Current events Health (alcohol & tobacco) Study skills	Relationships Masculine/feminine (sexuality) Identify anger/joy Listening skills Explain sexual harassment Non-Violent Communication Debating Fair arguing Drugs, drinking Advertisements Test taking skills & techniques for success	Emotional boundaries How to process feelings Creative playfulness Conflict resolution Vocational training The media & pollution of the "I" Current local events Stress management Adolescent loneliness issues	Life management Life recapitulation (Senior seminar) (pre-birth to death) Community building (How to provide before someone needs to ask) Global citizenship Current world events What is service to others? Finding the "Self"
		Curriculum		
Thinking Capacities	Thinking lives in the Will	Thinking lives in the Feelings	Thinking lives in the Thinking Now the student can ponder his/her own thoughts	Ego Directed Thinking
Thinking Skills	Causal	Teleological	Analytic	Synthetic
Historical Orientation	Modern	Ancient	Medieval/Renaissance	Destiny Questions
Writing Tasks	Summarize	Compare/Contrast	Analyze	Synthesize
Poetry to Heal the Soul	Ballads	Epic	Dramatic	Lyric
Project Week	***Farming*** How is farming economically possible & what rhythms are followed?	***Forestry/Conservation*** How can we care for wild lands and wildlife? Combine with surveying.	***Industry*** Work on an assembly line. What is social? What is work? Labor unions?	***Vision Quest*** Develop an experience to allow for inner listening and self-finding.
Self Esteem Building	Festivals, right recreation, sports, music, art, crafts, eurythmy, drama, sculpture →			
Health Focus	Smoking/drugs/alcohol/sexuality (developed each year as appropriate to age)		Mental health (perversity, meditation, insanity, prayer, philosophy)	
Soul Needs	Put your feet on the ground! The world is yours!	A new beginning! Establish your own inner foundation!	Thinking creates the world! Nature needs human culture!	Who is the human being? What is my life task?

Endnotes

1. Christopher Clouder, *Social and Emotional Education. An International Analysis, Fundación Marcelino Botin Report*, 2008, p. 25.
2. Testimony before the US Congress on National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day by Goldie Hawn, Washington, DC, May 7, 2009. http://www.casel.org/hawn_testimony_2009.
3. See Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophy*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1969, pp. 41–44.
4. Such as Marti Berstrom, António Damàsio, Reuven Bar-On, and Linda and Nick Elksnin, to name a few. Brain research indicates that emotion and cognition are profoundly interrelated processes. Specifically, "recent cognitive neuroscience findings suggest that the neural mechanisms underlying emotion regulation may be the same as those underlying cognitive processes" (Bell and Wolfe 2004, p. 366). Emotion and cognition work together, jointly informing the child's impressions of situations and influencing behavior. Most learning in the early years occurs in the context of emotional supports (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000). "The rich interpenetrations of emotions and cognitions establish the major psychic scripts for each child's life" (Panksepp 2001). Together, emotion and cognition contribute to attentional processes, decision making, and learning (Cacioppo and Berntson 1999). Furthermore, cognitive processes, such as decision making, are affected by emotion (Barrett et al., 2007). Brain structures involved in the neural circuitry of cognition influence emotion and vice versa (Barrett et al., 2007). Emotions and social behaviors affect the young child's ability to persist in goal-oriented activity, to seek help when it is needed, and to participate in and benefit from relationships (California Department of Education, http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/itf09socemodev.asp).
5. António Damàsio, *Descartes' Error*.
6. Linda Lantieri, *Social and Emotional Education: An International Analysis, Fundaciòn Marcelino Botin Report*, 2008, p. 199.
7. Aristotle, *On Politics, Book VIII*, "Education and the Ideal State."
8. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) works to establish social and emotional learning as an essential part of education from preschool through high school.
9. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, NY: Bantam Books, 1997.
10. Ibid., p. 291.
11. Ibid., p. 268.
12. Rawson & Richter. *The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner/Waldorf Curriculum*, 2000.
13. See *Survey of Waldorf Graduates, Phase II*, David Mitchell and Douglas Gerwin, Wilton, NH: Research Institute, 2007, and *Absolventen von Waldorfschulen*, Dirk Randoll and Heiner Barz, ed., Wiesbaden, Germany: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007.
14. Trevor Mepham, (conference reporter, *European Council for Steiner/Waldorf Education News*, no. 15, June 2009.
15. Rudolf Steiner, *A Psychology of Body, Soul and Spirit*, NY: SteinerBooks, 1999. Steiner describes "sympathy and antipathy as the two primary forces in our soul. The force of sympathy lives in our Will; the force of antipathy is released from our nervous system—through our intellectual processes."
16. Anke Weihs, "Youth Guidance and Empathy," *Waldorf Journal Project, no. 6*, Ghent, NY: AWSNA Publications, pp. 35–36.
17. Thomas Weihs, "Empathy," *Waldorf Journal Project, no. 6*, Ghent, NY: AWSNA Publications, p. 34.
18. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, NY: Penguin Books, 2002, p. 526.

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Picture two animals: a fox and a hedgehog. Which are you? An ancient Greek parable distinguishes between foxes, which know many small things, and hedgehogs, which know one big thing. All good-to-great leaders, it turns out, are hedgehogs. They know how to simplify a complex world into a single, organizing idea—the kind of basic principle that unifies, organizes, and guides all decisions. That's not to say hedgehogs are simplistic. Like great thinkers, who take complexities and boil them down into simple, yet profound, ideas (Adam Smith and the invisible hand, Darwin and evolution), leaders of good-to-great companies develop a Hedgehog Concept that is simple but that reflects penetrating insight and deep understanding.

– Jim Collins
Good to Great