



Social and emotional learning – prevention and promotion

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Dorina Tápai¹

Abstract

Children often suffer from stress factors related to the dynamic and continuous changes in our society such as pressure on parents, divorce, harmful content from the media, including the Internet. For these children it is not enough to gain academic skills in school, it is also important to develop social and emotional skills. These skills contribute to achieving success in school. The system of prevention involves all the students, reinforces the acquired social and emotional skills and also prevents the appearance of risk behaviors. The process of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is in the service of primary prevention, which can help students to learn, practice and reinforce skills. Certain SEL programs will be reconsidered to see how these programs function in practice and which methods are in the service of skills development. Also, we will gain some insight into the development of social and emotional skills in Hungarian schools.

Keywords: prevention, social and emotional skills, school psychology

¹ University of Szeged (Hungary)

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Introduction

Traditionally, the primary mission of public education is to support the development of academic skills, the focus being on academic achievement. But there is no question to the fact that today the objectives of public schools are much more diverse. Some examples of this broader agenda include the promotion of mental health and psychological well-being, development of social and emotional skills, promotion of good citizenship (Merrell, Carrizales, Feuerborn, Gueldner, & Tran, 2007). There is a growing interest in social and emotional skills, which contribute to children's psychological well-being (Segrin & Taylor, 2007; Chen, 2006). Furthermore, social and emotional factors (e.g. classroom climate, student-teacher interactions) have a very important influence on learning (Wang, Haertel and Walber, 1993). In strong agreement with Merrell and his colleagues (2007), I propose that teaching children social and emotional skills is one of the most critical challenges for educators and mental health professionals in the 21st century.

Ideally, social and emotional learning begins in infancy, at home where there is a competent and loving parental background providing positive role models and promoting children's well-being (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). The development of social competence depends on personality, family factors and school environment. School effects this development in three ways, namely: (1) physical environment; (2) the role of peer groups; and (3) the role of the teacher. Empirical studies show that the proper arrangement of classrooms and school climate have an important influence on social and emotional skills (Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1993). Together with the increase of individualisation, the socialising role of peer groups is rising, but the weakening effects of family are reduced (Buda, 1998). The effect of peer groups is significant, and it can be observed that family strength is weak (Buda, 1998). A survey conducted in the spring of 2001 included more than a hundred thousand high school students. One of the examined dimensions showed that students talk about their problems and questions with their friends (Paksi, 2001). For many children, teachers are adult role models who can provide them with resiliency and coping skills and can also promote their social and emotional learning (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

School is an institute where educational effects are available (Buda, 1998); it is therefore an appropriate place for prevention and health promotion activities (Porkolábné & Sztó, 1987).

The public health model

Traditionally, school psychologists examined students' intellectual, academic, and perceptual traits, and paid less attention to their social skills. Later, their focus of attention shifted to six broad areas: (1) individual evaluations; (2) direct interventions; (3) indirect interventions; (4) research and evaluation; (5) supervision and administration; and (6) prevention (Oakland, 1989). Although the main issue for school psychologists is helping those with special problems, they have an important role in the field of prevention,

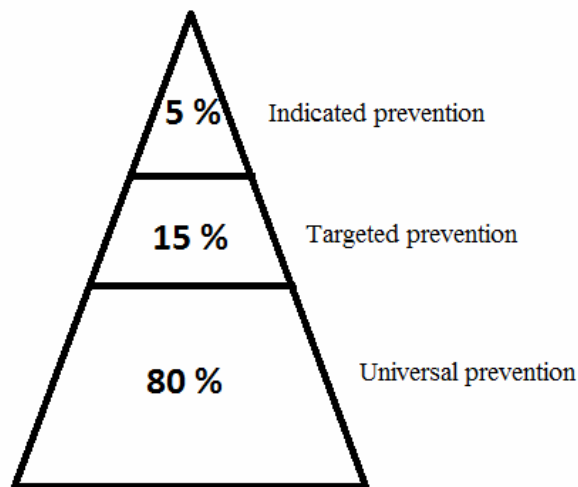
fostering healthy growth and ruling out the occurrence of specific problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse or violence. It can be seen that school psychologists are key persons in developing prevention-oriented programs.

Carrying out preventive mental health activities involved different methods. In many countries, rather than using thematic education, they practised behavioural response in certain situations and in how to say no (Buda, 1998). In the practice of school psychology, they work out model programs for prevention (Porkolábné & Szitó, 1987). The public health perspective takes into consideration populations rather than specific individuals (Strein, Hoagwood & Cohn, 2003).

In the model of Zins and Elias (2006), cooperation with school staff, family and community constitutes the basis of promotion. This model distinguishes between three systems: system (1) of prevention, (2) of early intervention and (3) of treatment. Each system involves a different number of students overlapping with one and another. The system of prevention involves all the students, the system of early intervention involves only high-risk students, and finally the system of treatment consists of students having serious problems (Zins & Elias, 2006).

Educational researchers have adopted a public health model for preventing behavioural and emotional problems (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). This model is referred to as a 'triangle' which has three levels of prevention (see Figure 1). The bottom section includes about 80% of students. This is the primary level, which covers universal prevention efforts, with students doing generally well at school (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Universal interventions ensure the overall climate of a school. The middle section includes about 15% of students showing certain indications of risk. This is the secondary level, covering targeted prevention efforts. Approximately, 5% of students are on the top of the triangle. These students have the most urgent needs. This is the tertiary level, which means indicated prevention efforts. This population may be the smallest, but it demands most of the time and energy, and school psychologists focus on this level. It is very important to reduce the probability of students getting into tertiary level (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

Figure 1. The three-level "triangle of promotion" (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).



The systemwide prevention model emphasize that (1) students who possess the required skills will not rise to the top of the triangle and (2) every child has to reinforce and practice the skills important in real-life situations. The goal of primary prevention is to maintain a school environment that promotes students' learning and mental health and also decreases the proportion of students in the second and third level of the "triangle of promotion" (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

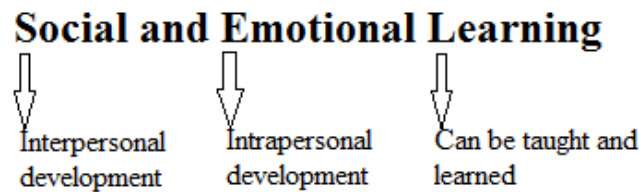
In the process of primary prevention not only school psychologists have an important role, but so do teachers. Teachers can function as a model person possessing the required social and emotional skills. There exist several evidence-based and prevention-oriented programs that teachers can apply in their own classroom, mainly in the United States. The curriculum contains tasks for every session.

Social and Emotional Learning

The term Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) was coined in 1994 by the members of the Fetzer Institute. The aim of prevention researchers, educators and child advocates was to create a program suitable for promoting prevention and protect children's mental health (Zins & Elias, 2006). The broader area of SEL is rather extended, including social competence training, positive youth development or violence prevention (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Areas which promote educational intervention programs have their scope on children's social and emotional skills.

If we want to define the term SEL, we can do it this way: "SEL is a process through which we learn to recognise and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors" (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004, p. 4). SEL has three aspects, namely, social, emotional, and learning aspects (see Figure 2.).

Figure 2. The social, emotional and learning aspects of SEL (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).



Social aspects reflect interpersonal development, including relationships with peers, teachers and family members. Emotional aspects reflect intrapersonal development and also foster self-awareness. Finally, learning aspects mean that social and emotional skills are a set of behaviours teachable and learnable through instruction, practice and feedback. This indicates a natural link to schools (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). The learning aspect are reflected the most fundamental principles of social skills training program, and, according to them, social and emotional skills are learned behaviours, and social skills are best taught in natural settings and situations (Buda, 2003; Chen, 2006; Frosh, 2003).

In the process of social and emotional learning, students learn, practice and reinforce competences. Zins and Elias (2006) demonstrate five key components of effective SEL:

1. Self-awareness – Identification and recognition of one’s own emotions, sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence.
2. Social awareness – Empathy, respect for others and perspective taking.
3. Responsible decision-making – Personal and ethical responsibility.
4. Self-management – Impulse control, stress management and goal setting.
5. Relationship skills – Cooperation, help seeking, verbal and non-verbal communication (Zins & Elias, 2006).

These key components are similar to the system of Greene et al. (2011). In their work, they classify the domains of social skills. The list contains three domains (Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive) and twelve sub-domains with the associated skills. These emotional, behavioural and cognitive domains of social skills imply the five key components of effective SEL. As a result, it can be established that the process of SEL has a focus on students emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development.

SEL outcomes are related to success in school and in life (Zins & Elias, 2006). As a result of social and emotional learning, changes can be observed in student attitudes (e. g. higher sense of self-efficacy, more positive attitudes towards school and learning and improved coping with school stressors), behaviours (e. g. greater classroom participation and higher engagement, more prosocial behavior), and performance (e. g. improved learning-to-learn skill, better problem solving and planning).

Selected SEL Programs

In order to select a SEL program that matches the needs of students, one has to follow the process of strategic planning. To get this process, firstly one has to identify the needs of the school and the short- and long-term goals of students, assess the program that is being and has been used in the school, review programs that seem to suit needs and goals best and, finally, identify the resources necessary to sustain implementation efforts (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010).

In this section I will present some SEL programs that are most widely implemented in schools. These programs focus on students' social and emotional learning and can be implemented into general education classrooms. The selected evidence-based programs target violence prevention, social-emotional well-being via explicit instruction, prosocial skills, and they also improve academic functioning.

I Can Problem Solve is a prevention-oriented program developed by Shure (2000). The main goal is to teach children thinking skills that can be used to help preventing or resolving problems. It guides children to think for themselves, evaluate their own ideas, and encourages them to search more solutions to resolve their problems. The program contains two main issues: (1) pre-problem solving skills, and (2) problem-solving skills. The method is very complex, it teaches skills through the use of games, stories, puppets and role-playing. At the same time, it implements these skills into real-life situations. Homework tasks and tasks for parents help to reinforce the efforts of the training (Shure, 2000).

Strong Kids: A Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum was developed by Merrell and his colleagues (2007) at the University of Oregon. The program can be taught by classroom teachers, school counselors and school psychologists (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). This is a primary prevention program designed with students in grades 1 to 12. There are five grade-specific versions of the Strong Kids series. Usually there is a range of ten to 12 lessons in each volume, and lessons follow the same general instructional format. Strong Kids curriculum focuses on emotion awareness, anger management strategies, identifying and changing thinking errors, stress management and goal setting. Applying the Strong Kids curriculum in grades three to five, research shows that students begin to receive more academic specialisation, begin to interact with more children, and take more complex social tasks (Merrell et al., 2007).

Social Skills Lessons & Activities was developed by The Society for Prevention of Violence (Weltmann, 1996). This curriculum was designed to help teachers, care givers and parents to promote children's social and emotional skills. The age group covers Kindergarten to grade 12, which means four books. Each grade-level book contains 50 or more age-appropriate lessons for skills development. The ready-to-use curriculum focuses on self-esteem, self-control, respect for the rights of others, and the sense of responsibility (Weltmann, 1996). Each book contains an issue for parents, how to be

partners in development of social skills, how to be a role model for their child, and also encourages parents to interact with teachers (Weltmann, 1996).

The most fundamental principles of these training programs are that social and emotional skills are learned behaviours, and social skills are best taught in natural settings and situations (Buda, 2003; Chen, 2006; Frosh, 2003). These programs have a varied methodology. The methods include: modelling, role-playing, puppetry, discussing stories and feedback. The programs are complex, because they do not only refer to the development of students, but also focus on involving teachers and parents. The school-family-community partnership is the foundation for promoting the development of students (Zins & Elias, 2006). These are the most common features of a SEL program, but the targeted area, the age group and components can be different.

Prevention programs in Hungary

Unfortunately, in Hungary there are few social and emotional skills programs. The existing model programs focus only on children and are not so complex as the programs mentioned above. Furthermore, they are not part of the school curriculum and are always held by school psychologists. But we can find some Hungarian training programs which focus on social and emotional skills and incite further research projects. The goal of the following model program is to develop and promote students' social and emotional skills.

Konta and Zsolnai (2002) designed a prevention-oriented, two-year school-based program for children in grade second and third held by school psychologist. The aim of the program was to develop social skills, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, cooperation and tolerance. Researchers applied various methods: role playing, problem solving, discussing stories and feedback completed with a technique applied in music therapy. The results show a substantial improvement of the mentioned skills for the experimental group (Zsolnai & Konta, 2002).

The program called The development of social skills within school environment – Assessment of social skills training program for adolescents was a ten-week training program which focuses on three elements: (1) development of students' self-awareness and self-confidence; (2) improvement of their communication skills; and (3) learning about conflict resolution and problem solving methods (e.g. how to be assertive, how to use win-win strategy, anger management). The program was held by school psychologists in secondary schools for adolescents in grade 9 to 11. They applied various methods, like role playing, problem solving, discussing stories and feedback. The structure of the program was the same in all schools but the way it was passed off was probably different, because the tasks were based on students' personal experiences and reflected real problems (Tápai, 2012).

A social skills development training program developed by Sütőné (2003) contains 25 modules. These modules can be applied on their own, but for a combined effect all themes

need to be applied. These programs target at two age groups: children in grade four and children in grade eight. The dimensions of the targeted skills are self-awareness, responsibility and future-oriented image. The application of the mentioned social skills promotes relationship between peers and leads to success in the field of academic achievement, sports and vocation. The social skills promoted by the program have led to the development of a clearer self-image and appropriate self-assessment (Sütőné, 2003).

Summary

In general, schools focus on academic achievement, but there is a growing interest in social and emotional skills which can promote children's psychological well-being and academic achievement. In addition, social and emotional factors have a very important influence on learning. The system of prevention involves all the students and demands the work of the whole school staff (principal, teachers, school psychologist and social workers). Being part of prevention, mental health staff promotes competences that are clearly essential for all students.

In simple terms, SEL is a process in which students learn, practise and reinforce social and emotional competences. The different SEL programs show social and emotional competences that must be taught through training in order to achieve success in schools and life. Unfortunately, in Hungary we cannot report as complex programs as SEL, but there are some programs which promote students' social and emotional development.

The main question to answer is how the existing model programs of social and emotional skills development can be used to create a social and emotional learning curriculum which can be the part of everyday life in Hungarian schools.

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