

Social Emotional Learning in Education

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Abstract

I will never forget March 13, 2020. There are events people remember for the rest of their lives (e.g., 9/11), and, for me, March 13, 2020, is one of those events. Life changed for almost everyone after March of 2020. Schools closed overnight, and teachers, parents, and students had to adapt to new ways to learn and to support students. This article is one teacher's experiences during the pandemic, and I hope my story and those of my colleagues will help other teachers and parents create hope that life is going to move forward and that teachers, parents, and students are flexible and strong enough to not only survive these trials but also to learn new ways to be strong and successful. I have learned important lessons from my experiences and interactions with my students. The biggest lesson I learned is that social emotional learning is not a nice add-on for teachers and students; it is one of the vital elements of education to give students and teachers the emotional and psychological strength we all need to be successful in life. COVID-19 has demonstrated in vivid and clear ways how important it is for schools to support, teach, and have students learn in ways that assist every member of the school community to feel supported and cared about every day.

Keywords: social emotional learning (SEL), Choose Love (2021), student needs, teacher needs, learning and emotions, social learning

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN EDUCATION

Imagine the life of a student during a traditional school day. A first grader walking down the hall greeting their teachers with special high-fives, handshakes, hugs, and dances before they enter the classroom. While waiting for morning announcements, older students huddle together discussing their favorite music or television show. A teacher in a third-grade classroom is sitting in a circle with her students leading a mindfulness activity to help students start their day off more focused.

Now, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, educators, students, and parents across the globe are facing a new reality. How are educators supposed to foster a feeling of belonging with students while schools are closed and learning has shifted online? Under these conditions, is it still possible for teachers to maintain strong relationships with their students and keep them engaged in learning?

Starting from the day we left on Friday the 13th and moving to all online learning in 3 days to starting a year off fully remote, to slowly bringing in the grade levels and attempting to have as many students in the building as possible while also following COVID guidelines. Then to the holidays hitting and transitioning back to completely remote learning. When the new year arrived, we transitioned to another model of learning: hybrid. All the while, during every model of learning, teachers' focus has been to keep our students connected to our school emotionally and socially, by integrating social emotional learning (SEL) into our academic learning.

Friday the 13th

The last date I wrote on my white board was Friday, March 13, 2020. This was the last day I saw my class of 2019–2020 third graders. When I said goodbye to them that day, I did not imagine I would be teaching through a computer the rest of the year. The teachers went back to the building the following Monday, and we were trained for the next 3 days on how to use Zoom to teach our class, how to use Google Classroom to assign material and for work we wanted to grade, and how to use Screencastify to record ourselves so students could watch our videos at their convenience. Then, we were sent to our houses with a message to take whatever we thought we would need for teaching. There was no guess of how long, what materials would be helpful, or what we should focus on as most important. A few days later, we were invited back to school for a few hours to gather and make bags for our students. The directions were to give them the math books and school supplies on their desks. If we thought other items would be helpful, we put those in the bags, too.

We started off teaching primarily through Screencastify. We did not use Zoom yet! We posted work and had students submit assignments. Administration asked for every lesson (math, reading, writing) to be recorded so all students had an option to do assignments when it was convenient for them. I did what I could to keep going with the math assignments where we left off. For writing, we tried to continue our animal research projects we had left off on. I was happy I chose to send copies of their organizers and templates home with them. I learned how to use Seesaw as a way for students to record themselves reading to me and sharing their books and the stories they wrote.

Screencastify was interesting to learn. We had to learn about embedding videos and sharing screens. Once we figured this challenge out, we learned how to save to YouTube, create

a YouTube Channel, and upload our videos. After the videos were uploaded, they would be sent to Google Drive. Then, from there, assignments had to be created in Google Classroom where we could put the links to the videos and attach a follow-up assignment to see if students were watching the videos, we spent hours creating. This is when we discovered how helpful Google Forms and Google Docs are. Google Forms were neat because when students answer questions and send them to the teacher, the answers are immediately sent back to the teacher's document. Under a second tab, the teacher can see the response on her copy. Google Docs are helpful because the teacher can work in the same document as the student and help them fix their work as well as leave comments for them on the sides.

Attendance was a huge issue, and work completion was an even bigger concern. The school somehow determined a way to get a Chromebook or computer to any student in the district who needed one. They also found a way to get hotspots for students who needed Wi-Fi. A few weeks into complete remote learning, teachers were trained a bit more on how to work on and run a Zoom meeting. When we felt more comfortable, they challenged us to set our own meetings up and schedule our own meetings with students. In the beginning, we were not expected to teach lessons on Zoom. The idea was to get the students to be able to see our faces and talk to us. We played games and shared what we were doing instead of going places. We got as creative as we could to keep in touch with our students and families.

The biggest challenge at the end of the year was to determine how we were going to grade these students who were abruptly taken away from their classrooms. My district came up with a new grading policy. We dropped all letter grades and chose to grade them on a new scale: LP (limited progress), P (progressing), and D (demonstrating). These were chosen for math, writing, and reading along with a narrative for each subject. We also had two other sections that

included perseverance and problem solving. In conversations with my colleagues, it was clear these narratives were hard for many teachers to write. Who would have guessed spring would be only the beginning of our journey?

Fall 2020

In September, we started fully remote as the administration and school board worked out the kinks of bringing students back to school safely. After they sent surveys to parents, the district outlined Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. Plan A was school-based instruction that incorporated elements of remote learning and face-to-face instruction. Plan B was the hybrid with limited capacity model. Plan C was complete remote learning.

District-wide staff spent days training and learning more to prepare for all three models of learning. As a result of this pandemic, the district acknowledged the school year would be accompanied by various levels of apprehension, fear, and planning for the unknown. The superintendent promised that this year our educators would be committed to all students and families; the school district would focus on developing and maintaining strong connections with students and families. These connections would be critical in maintaining a focus on the social-emotional well-being of students and enhancing the safety of our school and community environments. Students would be met where they were, and we would all recognize that the transition would challenge everyone in different ways and that we might embrace them in different ways. Consistent communication would be the primary vehicle to lead the teachers, students, and parents through the unpredictable year ahead.

September started out with Plan A, with the option of parents choosing the Alternate Remote Plan (ARP). We started with a phase-in plan for students who would return to onsite learning. Students in grades PreK–2 and Grade 6 started first. Grades 3, 4, and 7 had the first 4

days of school remote and then join the younger grades. Last, the district brought in Grade 5 at the elementary school and Grade 8 at the middle school. In the classrooms, teachers prepared for students with all the new COVID guidelines that had to be followed. Many teachers packed up and brought home years of teaching. We were told the only items in the classroom were student and teacher desks. All tables were taken out of the classrooms and stored in the basement of schools. Administrators got creative and allowed teachers to keep classroom libraries in another room in the school.

Third-grade teachers set up our bookshelves in the art room. All unified arts (UA) teachers had to move on carts to the different classrooms because the administration did not want classroom after classroom to be in the same UA room throughout the day. This made cleaning between classes necessary, which was not possible with only one janitor in the building during the day. Desks in the classrooms were measured out 6 feet apart, and squares were taped on the floors so students knew where the desks belonged. We also gave students a “wobble square” for movement breaks. Adding in dancing and moving has always been an important part of elementary students' days. We now felt it was even more important to build in these times between lessons where they had to sit in front of a computer.

The next issue to be solved was how to manage snacks, lunch, recess time, moving in the hallways, water bubblers, small group learning, and more. Mask wearing, mask breaks, and the direction desks had to face led to more conversations. We decided if desks were 6 feet away from each other and all facing the same direction, the school would be safely socially distanced. Classroom supplies could no longer be shared, so supply lists were sent home with strict guidelines to label all items and have two separate bags or pencil boxes for art and the classroom.

Chromebooks did not arrive for some students until October due to backups and holds across the country. When we got Chromebooks for all the grade levels part of our learning during the day was to teach them how to use Google Classroom and any sites we planned to use during remote learning. At this point, we did not have remote students Zooming into our classroom. September, October, and the beginning of November went by like a whirlwind. Daily, we watched districts around us move into full remote situations because of the positive cases in their districts. Then, the first positive case was confirmed in our school. We learned all about contact tracing and learned it was the bus seating arrangements that ended up quarantining students from multiple classrooms.

Then we had parents from home who would call and let us know they were COVID positive, and they had to see if the student tested positive, too. We had many students miss 10–14 days due to fever or sniffles. If they chose not to get a COVID test, they had to keep students out for 14 days. This was before we were required to post lessons and assignments on Google Classrooms, but many of the teachers were already stressed about students missing so many days and so many lessons. We started doing both lessons on Google Classroom and for students who were still in school.

Holidays

We did not make it to Thanksgiving without going completely remote. We sent students home with their Chromebooks and any supplies they needed, again not knowing how long this remote learning would last. We stayed remote from Thanksgiving until Christmas. Because we stayed in this model for more than 3 weeks, they disassembled the ARP classes and put all students back into the original classrooms in which they would have started off the year. Teachers made calls to the new families, welcoming them to their new classroom.

Now the remote third-grade students would follow the third-grade schedule in its entirety. Teachers were directed to follow the regular schedule. The core classes in reading, writing, and math had to be live lessons on Zoom, and we were to keep attendance during these lesson times. The day had a Morning Meeting planned that included the Choose Love (2021) material and lessons. The Choose Love Intervention taught SEL skills by incorporating books with SEL themes, songs, and activities. The themes followed the Choose Love formula: Love = Courage + Gratitude + Forgiveness + Compassion in Action. All teachers in the district referenced a monthly calendar the counselors created. Third-grade teachers added more SEL theme books during Reading Workshop, which mixed in mindset themes like grit, perseverance, empathy, flexibility, and optimism.

Unified arts classes, recess, lunch, and intervention blocks were scheduled back in remotely. After a few weeks of this model, the district started to consider switching to a hybrid model. The fully remote students could choose to stay fully remote. The other students would be divided into Cohort 1 and Cohort 2. Cohort 1 would be in class Monday and Thursday. Cohort 2 students would be in school Tuesday and Friday. All students would be remote on Wednesday. Cohort 3 students came 4 days because of special education services, ESOL services, or if remote learning had led them to receive truant letters at home.

Teachers would teach synchronous and asynchronous instruction with a combination of recorded and live instruction for all students. Google Classroom would be incorporated into regular daily instruction. Students and families were given the goal of becoming adept at accessing and using Google Classroom for communication and assignments. Wednesday students had all their main lessons in the morning with independent work in the afternoon.

Teachers spent Wednesday afternoons training and learning how to use technology to ease the complication of teaching some students remotely and some students in school simultaneously.

A few weeks went by, and the district again decided it was time to switch from the Plan B hybrid model to Plan A, which was onsite with a synchronous component for remote students. Now students would be fully onsite with desks spaced at least 3 to 6 feet apart. Face masks and coverings continued to be required, and mask breaks were provided when students could be spaced 6 feet apart. Independent and small group work would be provided to remote students and students in the classroom. Students would now be onsite for 5 days, and remote students would be remote for 5 days. Teachers would continue teaching lessons on Zoom for the students who were remote and the students in the classroom simultaneously.

Social-Emotional Learning

As we embarked on this new world and way of learning, my school district had shown that curriculum is important, schedules are important, and following the COVID guidelines are important, but the social and emotional well-being of our students, families, and all members of the schools tops the list. The Choose Love Movement (2021) has grown over the years and now is an SEL plus program that is free for schools, and schools can teach the curriculum and spread love. This program is aligned with the Character and Social-Emotional Developmental Standards (Character.org, 2022) and includes Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2022) SEL standards. The advantage of the Choose Love program is how the program includes a variety of important skills to help students build their social-emotional skills through incorporating mindset, neuroscience, mindfulness, positive psychology, posttraumatic growth, and emotional intelligence components. The hope is that students will develop all the social and emotional skills necessary for success in school and after they graduate. These skills and tools

give students a foundation for a healthy, fulfilling, and happy life, even and maybe especially in times like the world has faced for the last 2½ years.

Final Thoughts

What have I learned about teaching and learning during the last 2½ years? First, teachers and students (and probably parents) should think about the social-emotional side of our lives. This pandemic has shown us that students' social and emotional progress has been impaired. I also believe the same is true for teachers and parents. It seems everyone is drained from the devastation of COVID-19. Second, teachers and parents must take care of themselves to take care of our children. We cannot help our children and our students unless we have helped ourselves. Third, other spaces beyond the classroom should really consider the idea of choosing love in our dealings with each other. Hatred, anger, greed, and power appear to be a formula for disaster. I am hopeful teaching students how to be positive, caring, and loving people will give our world a future of cooperation instead of confrontation. Finally, we should not wait for an emergency to be prepared for how to deal with an emergency. Schools should proactively prepare for the next emergency now. We cannot envision every possibility, but we can develop more effective practices so we can adapt more readily to whatever the next emergency will be.

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