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Reading: The Key to Addressing Students' Social Emotional Needs in the Time of COVID-19

Cover Page Footnote

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

Reading: The Key to Addressing Students' Social Emotional Needs in the Time of COVID-19

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Education is known for being in a state of constant change. School curricula are established, embraced, implemented, and then oftentimes, a few years later, replaced with newer, more innovative curricula. Lesson plans change from year to year with revisions and improvements as do the current *best* teaching practices. However, no one could have anticipated the seismic shift in education that arrived as teachers are now asked to teach in-person and/or virtually and sometimes synchronously. Educators need to continue to teach curricula that address the state standards, employ rigorous lesson plans that offer differentiation for optimal student ascension, and ensure that the students' social emotional needs are being met. A new era of education has arrived, one that focuses on the academic and social/emotional success of our students. This change has shifted the role of English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in the classroom.

The experience of the pandemic has solidified for educators that now more than ever the social emotional learning and ultimately the well-being of our students and educators must be of top priority. Let's take a brief moment to discuss social emotional learning (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leader in SEL, defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions"—quite a difficult but necessary feat during a

pandemic. As an ELA teacher, it is no longer enough to teach about reading, writing, speaking, and listening (English Language Arts Standards); we must pivot into becoming teachers of literacy *and* pillars of support for our students' social and emotional well-being. So, I ask, what is the best way to ensure that educators and more specifically ELA teachers are guiding students in creating healthy identities, managing emotions, and building relationships and empathy, while also sustaining academic rigor? Something we have always done—*read*.

As many schools and districts have begun integrating community circles, establishing social emotional curricula, character-building lessons, etc. into their daily routines, the simple act of reading remains a largely untapped resource. In addition to improving students' comprehension, stamina, fluency and critical thinking skills, reading can be used as a vehicle to increase students' overall happiness, build empathy, increase community, and address students' social emotional development: all areas in dire need during COVID-19. It is paramount that ELA teachers and educators alike prioritize independent reading. Educators must make a valiant effort to reawaken the sacred time of reading in every child, every day.

Creating a Culture of Reading & Community

We know there is a critical need for students of all ages to be engaged in authentic reading and writing experiences, as "Literate lives aren't a privilege, [but] a right and a cornerstone of an informed society" (Gordon, 2018, p. 28). This begins

by creating a culture of reading. When students are active participants in a culture of reading, they are able to develop their reading identity. They can answer: who am I as a reader, why do I read, do I identify as an avid reader, nonreader, or neither? Once established, this identity allows students to unearth a sense of self and “esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and the desire for reputation or respect from others (e.g., status, prestige)” (McLeod, 2020), all touching upon elements of much needed social emotional learning.

Yet, too often teachers find themselves inundated with curricular deadlines, benchmarking, and more, and as an effort to meet these demands, they sacrifice time for independent reading. When polled, the International Literacy Association (2020) reported, “82% of teachers surveyed indicate[d] that students should read independently every day for at least 20 minutes, [but] only 33% (of teachers) report[ed] that students have this daily opportunity” (p. 38), a striking disparity. To create a more robust culture of reading, teachers and students alike must hold daily reading as a core value, a non-negotiable. In ELA, this may be at the expense of a mini-lesson or read aloud. In other core content classes, there may need to be a time for independent reading, not just Science or Social Studies based readings. If schools are asking staff members to prioritize the social emotional learning of their students, via community circles, SEL curricula, daily check-ins, etc., why shouldn’t independent reading also be considered as a viable method for addressing students’ needs? It’s our job as educators to lean into this work, knowing that solidifying students’ sense of self via reading will address their social emotional needs in the current climate as well as facilitate their academic success.

As educators, we must adapt to our students’ evolving needs by giving them time to engage in authentic reading. Donalyn Miller and Jeff Anderson (2011),

stated that “the idea that they can’t read or don’t like to read is not on the table. Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own books to read empowers them and encourages them. It strengthens their self-confidence, rewards their interests, and promotes a positive attitude towards reading by valuing the reading and giving him or her a level of control” (p. 23). Student choice is step one in creating autonomy in our classrooms. We must foster empowerment, encouragement, and positive attitudes—vital components needed to respond to our students’ current needs. Step two would be to consciously designate daily independent reading time. Students need uninterrupted time to read. On a macro level, schools can establish the first 10–15 minutes of the day to be devoted to independent reading. In the classroom, teachers can establish a routine of devoting the first 10 minutes of class to student reading.

The final component of creating a culture of reading in the classroom is Talk. Talking about books with teachers during small groups or individual student conferences, with peers during book clubs, or with community members or authors via FlipGrid, Zoom calls, etc. presents students with opportunities to begin to form relationships with their peers, teachers, and community members. As part of this community of readers, students can begin to feel a sense of belonging, something we are all so desperately in need of during COVID-19. Peter Johnson and Gay Ivey (2015) found when students were able to talk about the books they were reading “The properties of the community itself changed with increasing trust, openness, and acceptance of difference and decreasing cliques. Indeed, students came to see difference as a tool for learning. The function of the books shifted from tools of entertainment to tools for participation in the collective practice (and mind) of the classroom (and beyond), participation that enabled personal and collective development” (p. 314). Teachers

must devote time for students to read in the classroom and then allow students to talk about their reading to adequately address students' social emotional needs and build community, virtually or in person.

Physical & Social Benefits of Reading

Not only does reading guide students in achieving their sense of self and increase their ability for empathy, core SEL characteristics, it also helps reduce the added stress students may be experiencing during this pandemic. The constant unknown coupled with the traditional stressors in students' lives are reaching insurmountable proportions. A study recently conducted on student stress levels during COVID-19 found that 71% of students "indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Multiple stressors were identified... These included fear and worry about their own health and of their loved ones [91%], difficulty in concentrating [89%], disruptions to sleeping patterns [86%], decreased social interactions due to physical distancing [86%], and increased concerns on academic performance [82%] (Son et al., 2020)."

As educators think about students' social emotional needs, they must equip them with tools to mitigate these new stressors present in their lives. The tool—to read more.

Cognitive neuropsychologist Dr. David Lewis (2009) conducted numerous studies that reported "reading for just 6 minutes can be enough to reduce stress levels by up to 68%." This occurs because "the human mind has to concentrate on reading and the distraction eases the tension in muscles and the heart." The facts are inarguable—if we want to help our students mitigate the stress of our new reality, we should start with allowing them more chances to authentically read in school.

Not only does reading have physical health benefits, but it is also shown to improve students' social skills, something that may be lacking in the time of COVID-

19. When studying the social aspects of reading, Peter Johnson and Gay Ivey (2015) found that students became "individually and collectively engaged, read more, had more positive peer relationships, had better self-regulation, and performed better on the state English Language Arts test" (p. 319). They also noted a reduction in behavior problems, an increase in students talking about books, improved maturity, compassion, and empathy towards one another, strengthening of peer and student teacher relationships, and an overall increase in happiness. In a time when COVID-19 has changed the educational landscape, an increase in positive relationships and happiness are core values that need to be fostered in schools. This can be done by providing multiple opportunities for engaged reading.

In the Time of a Pandemic, Not Just Academic but Empathetic

Psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) have proven that "reading literary fiction enhances the ability to detect and understand other people's emotions, a crucial skill in navigating complex social relationships" (p. 377). Today, educators are hyper-focused on addressing the social and emotional needs of our students; however, we may be focusing too much of our attention on installing new SEL curricula, when we may need to focus more on enhancing the already present curriculum. Tapping into independent reading with a laser focus would allow educators to instill guiding principles of how to manage emotions and feel and show empathy for others as, "Reading isn't just academic literacy—it expands our hearts and deepens our consideration of the world." (Gordon, 2018, p. 30). In schools, we often ask students to think about the characters in their reading. Experiencing moments of empathy for the character while trying to understand the character's motivations helps students understand the world around them, which is even more pertinent now during

COVID-19. As educators, we want to foster positive relationships, a sense of security, and empathy for each other within our classes both virtual and/or in person. A cornerstone of creating these relationships and building empathy can be by reading more.

Although I have asserted that what is needed in the time of COVID-19 is to read more, I would be remiss if I did not touch upon the common everyday issues that literacy educators face in regard to students and reading. Adding the additional pressure of COVID-19 and changes in responsibilities students may be facing at home, it is important to remember a few key ideas. As ELA teachers we cherish and value reading. We know from Selingo's (2017) research that if students want strong careers or futures they do not have the option of being nonreaders. Moreover, "if students are not reading in school, they are most likely not reading at home" (Atwell, 1987, p. 156). What is needed, however, is to reawaken this urgency for independent reading especially during COVID-19 when academic rigor and opportunity may be less accessible.

Additionally, during a pandemic, we must accept that some students may not read much right now, but we must continue to encourage them to see themselves as readers who can find joy in reading again when they are ready (Miller, 2020). Pernille Ripp (2017) has told us that the teaching of reading and writing is "not supposed to be quick and easy. It's supposed to be about human connection. It's one conversation at a time." These conversations today are invaluable. As we charge forward into a new era of education, we must be hyper-vigilant about allowing students the dedicated time to experience reading, to see themselves as readers, and to form their sense of self through various reading experiences. It is imperative to their social, emotional, and academic health as the future leaders of our society.

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