IL CONTRIBUTO DELLA RICERCA

Strengths of the heart and social-emotional learning

Opportunities to improve the lives of children and youth and our planet

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Summary

The article presents the importance of the socio-emotional learning (SEL) construct in the lives of children and young people. The use of SEL programs in schools promotes greater student well-being, as well as involving parents and teachers, promoting the school-family relationship.
The definition of "strength of the heart" summarizes the concept at the base of socio-emotional learning: the teacher through their skills promotes the social and emotional skills of students. Today's curriculum in most schools minimizes teaching important social-emotional skills, the «soft skills» or «strengths of the heart» that make a real difference in the lives of our children and youth. The model presented highlights the importance of this approach in schools, beyond traditional teaching.

Keywords

SEL- Social Emotional Learning; Emotional Intelligence; Social Skills; Resilience

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest worldwide, including in Italy, on social and emotional learning (SEL). Many agree that the survival and thriving of the human race depends on the cultivation of social and emotional skills and competencies – what Pfeiffer calls «strengths of the heart».

In this time of the novel Coronavirus pandemic, societies are finding empathy, compassion and respect and concern for others critical to the cooperative effort needed to tamp-down the virus. Similarly, at a time of increasing global racism, misogyny, and anti-immigration, and longings for authoritarian and even fascist rule, SEL may offer society one powerful antidote. Equally noteworthy, there has been a resurgence in recognizing the "whole child" – what Pfeiffer has called the marriage of «strengths of the heart, head and soul» (Pfeiffer, 2018). There remains a pressing need to refocus schools and communities on the holistic development of children and youth (Darling-Hammond, 2015). What is particularly exciting is that there is a growing body of scientific research demonstrating the many positive outcomes of SEL (Durlak et al., 2011).

This article provides an overview on what we know about SEL programs that work. We provide one example of an evidence-based social-emotional program that reflects universal, selective, and indicated preventive intervention (Pfeiffer & Reddy, 2001). The article includes a practical, "nuts and bolts" discussion on what is required to successfully implement a social-emotional learning program in Italian schools.

2. A personal note

Before we begin, we want to provide the reader with a "truth in advertising" statement about ourselves. We are both academic clinicians with primary professional affiliations working as professors in major research universities – Steven Pfeiffer in the USA and Renata Prado in Brazil. Our thinking and views on ways to promote social and emotional learning are based on a reading of the scientific literature and on our own clinical research. We have over 45 years combined experience in the real-world of clinical practice, providing mental health services in the USA and Brazil.

Professor Pfeiffer, first author, was introduced to strength-based, SEL programs in the 1980's. His clinical supervisor at the time, Dr. Aden A. Burka, a brilliant and creative clinician, had developed an innovative summer program, "Challenges," based on his deep, intuitive understanding of the importance of resilience, developing a mastery orientation, and helping kids learn to successfully face personal, real-world challenges in an enjoyable, growth-promoting and non-threatening way. The Challenges Summer Program, run on school campuses in New Orleans, challenged students to "learn how to learn" by developing skills in mastering challenging academic material and social encounters, and learning how to effectively cope with one's emotional reactions. This was one of the very first strength-based, "positive psychology" programs (Burka & Piggott, 1993).

What follows is a synthesis of our own experiences and interpretation of the published scientific papers on SEL interventions. We offer suggestions on how to implement a successful, strength-based, SEL intervention program in the schools. We hope that you find the ideas relevant to your own work.

3. Overview on strengths of the heart

Professor Pfeiffer's research, clinical work and writings have focused on understanding the social-emotional lives of children and youth, and why all kids do *not* grow up to be

successful young adults. A frequent speaker in Italy, his work also has focused on what educators and parents can do to encourage and guide their kids onto a success trajectory (Pfeiffer, 2013). This led his research lab at Florida State University, where Renata Prado was a post-doctoral fellow, to examine strength-based interventions and the exciting work in positive psychology in support of students at risk for social-emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems (Pfeiffer, 2018).

Pfeiffer came to understand that kids who are successful in life possess three important attributes. Originally, he named these, «strengths of the heart, head and soul». The name morphed to a more-simple term, «strengths of the heart». The three attributes that constitute « heart strengths» – variously called by others as «soft skills» or SEL skills, make a real difference in the lives of all kids who grow up to be successful adults (Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Suldo, Hearon, & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2018).

The three attributes that make up «strengths of the heart» are: *emotional intelligence* (EI), *social skills*, and *character strengths*. Together, when these three sets of «soft skills» are operative they make a huge difference in the successful outcomes and well-being of youngsters' lives (Pfeiffer, 2013, 2017).

3.1. Emotional intelligence

Researchers view EI as the ability to understand, read, and control one's own and others' emotions. Most would agree that this is a very important set of skills to be successful in life. In Pfeiffer's early work while at Duke University, as early as 1998, his writings and research suggested that EI might be the key to help protect *all* children and youth from psychological and emotional conflicts and psychological problems (Pfeiffer, 2001; Pfeiffer & Valler, 2016). However, he was wrong. His research group conducted research and developed a pilot EI scale. But they came to recognize that EI, although a highly appealing psychological construct in its own right (Zeidner, 2018), was *not* the"'stand-alone", sole answer to ensuring a well-lived, meaningful, and successful life (Pfeiffer, 2001, 2013).

Two ways of viewing EI have emerged since the concept was first introduced as early as 1995 by Daniel Goleman: ability models and mixed ability/trait models (Bar-On, 2002; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000; Perez, Petrides, & Furnham, 2005; Pfeiffer, 2001). Although the two different models share some similarity, they differ enough that very different ways to measure EI have evolved based on the two distinct models.

The ability EI model focuses on the ways in which individuals integrate cognition and emotion. Tests have been developed to measure EI from an ability model perspective. The tests measure skills using performance-based measures, similar to how we measure IQ. The most widely recognized ability model is the 4-Branch Model, developed by Mayer and Salovey (1997).

The 4-Branch ability EI measure is called the Mayer Salovey Caruso EI Test (MSCEIT-Youth Version; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). Coincidentally, the MSCEIT is published by the same test publisher, Multi-Health Systems (MHS), as Pfeiffer's own newly revised *Gifted Rating Scales* (GRS™ 2; Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2003). The MSCEIT-Youth Version is a group or individually administered performance-based test with almost one hundred items across four scales: Perceiving Emotions, Using Emotions, Understanding Emotions, and finally, Managing Emotions. The new GRS™ 2 parent scale actually includes EI items, making it a unique gifted rating test (Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2007).

Mixed Models of EI, on the other hand, combine or blend elements of ability models with "trait" and personality EI. Trait or personality EI is a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Trait EI has often been referred to as emotional self-efficacy, contributing to the view that trait EI is not a type of intelligence (Pfeiffer, 2001). The mixed models combine temperament, behavioral style and social skills. Daniel Goleman's (1995) writing reflects this approach to viewing EI as a constellation of competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and motivation – in many ways, similar to the important «soft skills» that ultimately became Pfeiffer's «strengths of the heart».

One of the more widely youth measures that has been developed to measure EI from a mixed model perspective is the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version (Bar-On EQ-i: YV; Bar-On & Parker, 2000). A second mixed models measure of EI is the Schutte Self-Report EI Scale (SSEIT: Schutte et al., 1998, 2009). Both are self-report measures.

Over the course of many years of research conducted within his University research lab, Pfeiffer grew increasingly disenchanted with these measures of EI, which led his research team to develop a unique EI measure, the *Pfeiffer Emotional Intelligence Scale* (Pfeiffer, 2015; Pfeiffer & Valler, 2016). Pfeiffer's team sought to develop a reliable rating scale that parents and teachers completed, that drew items from both the EI ability and mixed models (Valler, 2019). His hope was that a set of EI items could complement a new revision of the already widely used *Gifted Rating Scales* (GRS; Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2003). MHS was undertaking a new standardization sample for the GRS™ 2. Pfeiffer created a parent form for the GRS™ 2, including a set of unique strength-based "soft skill" items for the new GRS™ 2 Parent Form (Pfeiffer & Jarosewich, 2007). The new GRS™ 2 parent form will be available in early 2021. We are pleased that surveys confirm that the GRS is the most widely used rating scale to identify gifted students (Benson et al., 2019). Pfeiffer thought that a companion parent form that included «strengths of the heart» items would be well-received by practitioners in the USA, Italy, and worldwide who work with high ability students. We hope you agree!

3.2. Social skills

In Pfeiffer's clinical work, and in his leadership roles at the Duke TIP gifted summer programs and Florida Governor's School for Science and Space Technology, he observed that high IQ alone does *not* protect bright students who lack age-appropriate *social skills* or *character strengths*. He came to recognize that bright kids who displayed age appropriate social skills, such as taking turns, listening before speaking, not interrupting another peer, being polite, considerate and helpful, and having good manners were much more successful in these highly competitive programs. They got along much better with peers, instructors and counselors, were well-liked, and developed friendships during the summer residential programs. It became increasingly apparent that social skills were important in the lives of successful gifted students. It was also apparent that gifted kids who lacked or didn't display age-appropriate social skills were more likely to be unhappy, oftentimes despondent, emotionally detached, lonely, and troubled.

3.3. Character strengths

Pfeiffer also recognized, as Headmaster of the summer residential programs, that character strengths were important in the well-being and adjustment of gifted students (Jones et al.,

2015). Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide a helpful classification of character strengths and virtues; Pfeiffer's lab found their taxonomy useful as they began to investigate the 24 character strengths that their handbook catalogued. Pfeiffer's University research lab investigated the different tests that measure character strengths. They began collecting and cataloguing measures of empathy, kindness, forgiveness, openness to experience, humility, optimism, gratitude, courage, and compassion. They then conducted studies to determine which character strengths appeared most relevant in the lives of successful students. They hoped to build a rating scale of items that measure key character strengths.

As already mentioned, based as much on first-hand experience working with hundreds of students in residential settings, as on the emerging positive psychology research (Suldo et al., 2018), Pfeiffer's research team believed that well-developed social skills and character strengths, along with EI, enhanced the social-emotional functioning of youth (Winner, 2000; Pfeiffer, 2013, 2017). Pfeiffer viewed EI, social skills, and character strengths – what he initially called «the triad of soft skills» but later came to call «strengths of the heart», as important in the success and psychological well-being of all students. We believe that heart strengths are as important as «head strengths» – which are, all-too-often, over-emphasized to the relative neglect of heart strengths in the schools (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

4. Linkage to social emotional learning (SEL)

This leads us to an important point: the linkage between strengths of the heart and SEL. By now, the reader likely sees the obvious connection! SEL is one of the «three legs of the strengths of the heart stool». The other two legs are character strengths and EI. Taken together, these three components make up strengths of the heart. And they reinforce a focus on the "whole child" – an important commitment to the "marriage" of strengths of the heart, head and soul (Pfeiffer, 2018). We believe that there remains a need to refocus schools on the holistic development of children and youth (Darling-Hammond, 2015). What is exciting is that there is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating the positive outcomes of programs in the schools that promote SEL, character development, and EI.

5. An illustrative evidence-based SEL program that work in the schools

Next we introduce one SEL program as an example of an effective and highly impactful school-based program. The program that we describe is illustrative of a great many evidence-based SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2015). The reader interested in a more in-depth discussion of the research supporting SEL programs is encouraged to read an often-cited meta-analysis of school-based interventions that appears in *Child Development* (Durlak et al., 2011).

5.1. Illustrative SEL program for preschool children

SEL programs for preschool children have expanded, accompanied by growing research on effective primary prevention strategies to build important skills for long-term school, life success and well-being (Durlak et al., 2015). A recent review of the evidence base for preschool SEL programs indicates they are effective when they improve teachers' classroom

management and the quality of teacher-student interactions; include SEL skill-building for preschool students; integrate with academic enrichment programs; use professional development to promote high-fidelity implementation; and involve parents (Bierman, Greenberg, & Abenavoli, 2016, p. 2). In addition, behavioral management strategies, emphasis on social-cognitive and self-regulation are important to include in programs with a well-designed curriculum and teaching practices to promote positive child development (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015).

A noteworthy SEL program model is the Incredible Years (IY) series;[1] it will be briefly described here. The IY is a set of principle-driven, dynamic interventions that are flexibly adapted to cultural context. The main goal is to deliver programs and materials that develop positive parent-teacher-child relationships to promote social, emotional and academic competence in young children. Considered a universal preschool prevention strategy, it is an award-winning series of training programs for parents, teachers, and children grounded in cognitive social learning theory. The program is recommended by the APA Division 12 task force.

The IY Teacher Training Program is designed to help teachers to effectively manage their classroom and support children's optimal early development. It relies on building positive relationships with children using sensitive, responsive and systematic approaches, targeting five teaching skills: 1. use of specific, contingent attention and praise to support positive behavior; 2. use of incentives to motivate learning effort; 3. structuring the classroom effectively to prevent behavior problems; 4. use of non-punitive consequences to decrease inappropriate behavior; 5. strengthening positive teacher-student relationships (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015, p. 138).

It is recommended that the program be packaged to deliver monthly workshops over the school year and use self-reflective and experiential learning, group support and problem solving. Also, between teacher training workshops a IY coach visits teachers classrooms to model skills, support teachers individually and help them to implement the principles learned. To enhance the participants' engagement, a flexible approach is endorsed, which balances adaptation and implementation with high fidelity (Webster-Stratton et al., 2011).

Research on the impact of the program shows substantial improvement in teacher classroom management skills which enhance instructional time and child learning engagement, indicating gains in their academic and SEL skills. As pointed by Bierman et al. (2016) the combination of professional development for teachers and ongoing support and skill-based SEL programs led to important benefits, including: strengthening classroom management strategies, decreasing classroom behavior problems, improving learning, greater social-emotional competence, better social problem-solving skills, and less aggression.

5.2. Implementing a SEL program in the schools

It is easier to find a scientifically-based, and economically affordable (or even free) SEL program that works than it is to successfully implement the program in the schools. This is the "good and bad news" about SEL programs! Integrating SEL («soft skills») into the school culture and curriculum is a real challenge (Elias et al., 2015). Based on Pfeiffer's first-hand experience as a consultant, including in Italy, the following six activities are critical if one hopes to implement and sustain over time a viable SEL program:

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[1] See The Incredible Years site: http://www.incredibleyears.com

- Assess the school infrastructure to ensure that it will support SEL. We believe that some entity – a committee or leadership team must have responsibility and authority for the short and long-term implementation of SEL-related programs for sustainability. The work group should help develop, with input from multiple shareholders and constituents, a *mission statement* for a school-wide «strengths of the heart» or SEL program (Pfeiffer, 2013). Well-written mission statements communicate the school's beliefs about the nature of a positive school culture and climate and the need for and value in such a program. The mission statement can include a few overarching SEL program goals (Knowling, 2002). The mission statement should be written based on input from multiple constituents to be adoptable into the school culture (Pfeiffer, 2013). Well-written mission statements can include the latest thinking and research on SEL.
- In addition to assessing the school's infrastructure, it is important to assess the *school's culture and climate*. There are a variety of tools that can be used for assessing a school's culture and climate. It is helpful to include teachers, parents, staff, administrators, and students during this process. Data can be culled from surveys, focus groups, and analysis of artifacts. The work group may need to brainstorm ways in which the school culture and climate may need to be modified to help the implementation and sustainability of an SEL program.
- Articulating the SEL *program goals* is a very important, and an often- overlooked step. SEL program goals should be clear, explicit statements that state what actual outcomes the school, parents, and community desires and expects when adopting the new program (Pfeiffer, 2013). A hypothetical example of a program goal is as follows:

  Students in the Sun Rises Over Pavia High School, Italy will participate in community-based service-learning opportunities to gain leadership experience, deepen their appreciation for diversity, immigration, and multicultural issues, and broaden their sensitivity to and empathy for the needs of less fortunate citizens in the Pavia and surrounding communities.

- Make sure that each SEL *program goal lends itself to a set of specific objectives that are stated in behavioral and measurable terms*. Also make sure that the program goals are relevant and important. Finally, confirm that each program goal is worthy of the time, effort, and resources that will be required to attain them.
- Develop *simple, reliable and quantifiable ways to measure the progress* of students toward the stated SEL program goals. Pilot the measures and expect to make modifications and adjustments before you agree on a set of SEL program goals and objectives for each grade.
- *Track how well the program is working.* Expect to make adjustments to the program curriculum based on ongoing, precise and systematic monitoring of the indicators of student change and program success – or lack thereof. Expect that things won't all go well, and that program corrections and modifications are routine aspects of implementing any new program (Pfeiffer, 2013). The planning group needs to stay connected to those who are «walking the walk» (Elias, 2010). Direct, ongoing consultation with teachers, staff and administrators ensures that a new program thrives, and does not «wither on the vine» (Pfeiffer, 2013).

The above six points describe the practical considerations and care which is required to ensure the success in implementing any new SEL program in a classroom or school. It isn't nearly as difficult to identify, initiate or commence a new program – when there is, at the

start of the new program, a whole lot of excitement and enthusiasm – and often funding – for the new program. What is very challenging is *sustaining* the new program over time. Durability, stability and resilience in the face of pressures to «go back to the old system and discontinue the new program» is the great challenge that program organizers need to be cognizant of when launching a new SEL program.

6. Conclusion

Educators are devoted to the students that they teach in their classrooms. Educators want only the best for their students. And educators commit boundless time, energy, planning and resources – essentially, everything in their power, to support the success of the students that they work with. Educators want their students to succeed – in the classroom, and later, in life. The dilemma is that educators and schools today, in the USA and Italy, and a great many countries across the globe, put too much emphasis on developing students' head strengths – things such as knowledge, memory, problem solving, abstract reasoning, sequencing information, concept formation, processing speed, learning academic material, and even creativity. The result is that this inadvertently leaves educators and schools wity very little time for developing students' hearts and souls.

Today's curriculum in most schools minimizes teaching important social-emotional skills, the «soft skills» or «strengths of the heart» that make a real difference in the lives of our children and youth. We see too little attention in the schools to teaching, and then routinely practicing and reinforcing, SEL skills such as empathy, compassion, self-calming techniques, proficiency in accurately reading one's own and other's feelings, talent in managing conflict and learning to lead, follow and be a good «team player», becoming proficient in offering help, expressing sincere forgiveness, and voicing appreciation and gratitude.

Schools rarely encourage, teach, or promote ethics, the value of developing and then following a just and coherent belief system, or living a life based on integrity, morality, and universal values. Research has confirmed that these «soft skills» can be taught, learned, applied in the classroom and on the playground, and make a real difference in the lives of children. If our goal is to help children grow healthily and flourish as adults, be committed to their community and universal values that protect our planet and all living things, then paying attention to strengths of the heart will support this vision for the future (Niemiec, 2014; Pfeiffer, 2017; Suldo, 2016).

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