

Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf>)

In some form or another, every school has goals that emphasize a desire to enhance students' personal and social functioning. Such goals can be seen as reflecting views that social and emotional growth has an important role to play in

- enhancing the daily smooth functioning of schools and the emergence of a safe, caring, and supportive school climate
- facilitating students' holistic development
- enabling student motivation and capability for academic learning
- optimizing life beyond schooling.

Sadly, the stated goals too often are not connected to daily practices at a school. This seems to be even more the case as increasing accountability demands mount for quick academic gains on achievement tests. Thus, at the same time that calls for attending to social and emotional learning grow louder and a variety of programs report promising research findings, the focus on such matters continues to be marginalized for the most part in schools.

Some schools, of course, do provide prominent demonstrations of curriculum-based approaches to promote social-emotional learning and incorporate character education (including programs designed to address risk factors and prevent problems). Others have programs that pair students with mentors or engage students in helping peers or encourage participation in "service learning" activity, and so forth. District-wide, however, a full-scale commitment to such programs is rare.

And, the situation is unlikely to change as long as the focus on social and emotional learning is viewed as taking time away from efforts to increase achievement test scores.

Given the last point, those concerned with promoting social-emotional learning need to place greater emphasis on strategies that can capitalize on *natural* opportunities at schools, and that can minimize transactions that interfere with positive growth. In keeping with this notion, our focus here is on (1) outlining a range of natural opportunities, (2) highlighting key principles underlying efforts to use such opportunities, and (3) suggesting who might take the lead in developing strategies for capitalizing on them. We conclude by suggesting it is time for a shift in research and training priorities and agendas.

What are Natural Opportunities?

The table on the next page offers examples of natural opportunities at schools for promoting personal and social growth. They are grouped into four categories:

- daily opportunities
- yearly patterns
- transitions
- early after the onset of student problems.

In effect, natural opportunities are one of the most authentic examples of "teachable moments." A few points about each will help clarify this point.

Table

Examples of *Natural Opportunities at School to Promote Social-Emotional Learning & MH*

I. *Using Natural Daily Opportunities*

- A. In the classroom (e.g., as students relate to each other and to staff during class and group instruction; as essential aspects of cooperative learning and peer sharing and tutoring; as one facet of addressing interpersonal and learning problems)
- B. School-wide (e.g., providing roles for all students to be positive helpers and leaders throughout the school and community; engaging students in strategies to enhance a caring, supportive, and safe school climate; as essential aspects of conflict resolution and crisis prevention)

II. *In Response to Yearly Patterns* – Schools have a yearly rhythm, changing with the cycle and demands of the school calendar. The following are examples of monthly themes the Center has developed for schools to draw upon and go beyond. The idea is to establish focal points for minimizing potential problems and pursuing natural opportunities to promote social-emotional learning.

- A. September – *Getting off to a Good Start*
- B. October – *Enabling School Adjustment*
- C. November – *Responding to Referrals in Ways That Can "Stem the Tide"*
- D. December – *Re-engaging Students: Using a student's time off in ways that pay off!*
- E. January – *New Year's Resolutions — A Time for Renewal; A New Start for Everyone*
- A. February – *The Mid-Point of a School Year - Report Cards & Conferences: Another Barrier or a Challenging Opportunity*
- B. March – *Reducing Stress; Preventing Burnout*
- H. April – *Spring Can Be a High Risk Time for Students*
- I. May – *Time to Help Students & Families Plan Successful Transitions to a New Grade or School*
- J. June – *Summer and the Living Aint Easy*
- K. July – *Using "Down Time" to Plan Better Ways to Work Together in Providing Learning Supports*
- L. August – *Now is the Time to Develop Ways to Avoid Burnout*

III. *During Transitions*

- A. Daily (e.g., capturing opportunities before school, during breaks, lunch, afterschool)
- B. Newcomers (e.g., as part of welcoming and social support processes; in addressing school adjustment difficulties)
- C. Grade-to-grade (e.g., preparing students for the next year; addressing adjustment difficulties as the year begins)

IV. *At the First Indication that a Student is Experiencing Problems* – Enhancing social and emotional functioning is a natural focus of early-after-onset interventions for learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Daily opportunities. Schools are social milieus. Each day in the classroom and around the school students interact with their peers and various adults in formal and informal ways. Every encounter, positive and negative, represents a potential learning experience. All school staff, and especially teachers, can be taught ways to use the encounters to minimize transactions that work against positive growth and to capitalize on many opportunities to enhance social-emotional learning.

Appreciation of what needs attention can be garnered readily by looking at the school day through the lens of goals for personal and social functioning. Is instruction carried out in ways that strengthen or hinder development of interpersonal skills and connections and student understanding of self and others? Is cooperative learning and sharing promoted? Is inappropriate competition minimized? Are interpersonal conflicts mainly suppressed or are they used as learning opportunities? Are roles provided for all students to be positive helpers throughout the school and community?

Of course, appreciating problems and opportunities is not enough. Pre- and in-service education must focus on teaching those working in schools how to minimize what's going wrong and enable personal and social growth.

Yearly patterns. The culture of most schools yields fairly predictable patterns over the course of the year. The beginning of the school year, for example, typically is a period of hope. As the year progresses, a variety of stressors are encountered. Examples include homework assignments that are experienced as increasingly difficult, interpersonal conflicts, and testing and grading pressures. There also are special circumstances associated with holidays, social events, sports, grade promotions, and graduation.

Each month strategies can be implemented that encourage school staff to minimize stressors and enhance coping through social-emotional learning and shared problem solving. To support such efforts, the Center has developed a set of monthly themes as examples for schools to draw upon and go beyond. (See the Center website for a description of how to pursue such themes.) One set of examples are listed in the Table; other themes are readily generated. The point is to establish a focus each month and build the capacity of school staff to evolve the school culture in ways that reduce unnecessary stressors and naturally promote social and emotional development.

Transitions. Students are regularly confronted with a variety of transitions – changing schools, changing grades, and encountering a range of other minor and major transitory demands. Such transitions are ever present and usually are not a customary focus of institutionalized efforts to support students. Every transition can exacerbate problems or be used as a natural opportunity to promote positive learning and attitudes and reduce alienation.

Schools need to build their capacity to address transitions proactively and in the process to be guided by their goals for enhancing personal and social functioning. Examples of school-wide and classroom-specific opportunities include a focus on welcoming new arrivals (students, their families, staff); providing ongoing social supports as students adjust to new grades, new schools, new programs; and using before and after-school and inter-session activities as times for ensuring generalization and enrichment of such learning.

Early after the onset of student problems. Stated simply, every student problem represents a need and an opportunity for learning – and often what needs to be learned falls into the social-emotional arena. Whatever the first response is when a problem arises, the second response should include a focus on promoting personal and social growth.

Some Key Principles Underlying Efforts to Use Teachable Moments

A natural focus on social and emotional learning at school should be built upon the same fundamental principles that are advocated in discussions of good schooling and teaching in a democracy. This means, first and foremost, addressing principles reflecting overlapping concerns about distributive justice (equity and fairness) and empowerment. Adherence to such concerns requires that school staff have

- clarity about the respective rights and obligations of all stakeholders
- the time, training, skills, and institutional and collegial support necessary to build relationships of mutual trust, respect, equality, and appropriate risk-taking
- the motivation and skill to create an accepting, caring, and safe environment and account for distinctive needs, assets, and other forms of diversity.

At a minimum, when designing and implementing instruction, practices must not have a negative impact on social and emotional growth. To this end, teachers should

- tailor processes so they are a good fit to the learner in terms of *both* motivation and capability (i.e., meet learners where they are)
- deal with students holistically and developmentally, as individuals and as part of a family, neighborhood, and community.

With a view to designing academic instruction in ways that will also enhance social and emotional learning, teachers should

- offer real choices and involve students in meaningful decision making
- contextualize and make learning authentic, including use of real life situations and “mentors”
- foster joint student learning activity and products.

And, all the above also are applicable when pursuing the “teachable moments” that arise during other natural opportunities.

Making it Happen

Increasing a school’s focus on natural opportunities for personal and social growth requires advocacy, planning, and building the capacity of school staff. At most schools, student support professionals represent natural leaders for pursuing all this. As a starting point, such staff can form a small work group dedicated to moving the agenda forward.

The functions for a work group include:

- developing a “map” of natural opportunities for promoting social-emotional development
- delineating ways in which students experience transactions that interfere with positive growth
- clarifying ways for staff to minimize negative experiences and maximize use of opportunities to promote positive growth
- providing a variety of learning opportunities for staff related to each of the above.