

Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in the Japanese Classroom

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“Why do some students thrive, while others struggle just to keep pace?”

Many educators and researchers have tried to answer this question by looking at factors such as motivation and affect, and developing strategies to improve engagement, accessibility and enjoyment. Having worked as a teacher-trainer and coordinating professional development workshops, I have always been interested in ways to improve language learning classrooms and facilitate content delivery. Strategies to make lessons fun, engaging and enjoyable often produce significant benefits, whether it is exciting activities, efficient instruction or effective classroom management. However, I felt that such strategies were somehow “missing the point” and that there were some deeper factor not being addressed, particular concerning students who continued to struggle. Moreover, classroom strategies that aimed to improve the “fun factor” of lessons, or to increase access to content and communication density tended to be short-term interventions where benefits did not persist beyond the current course. What happens, for example, to these students when they move on to different classes or different teachers? Do these practices explain why students experience peaks and troughs in their academic development or why some students can engage wholeheartedly in language learning only to dread English language classes later in their schooling?

As I pursued my own answers to these questions in my research, it seemed that such practices were developed with a focus on academic achievement rather than learner development. The goal being to help students achieve academic standards by improving access to material. By examining practice and implementing strategies to help students engage with and understand lesson content, it is hoped that the majority of students can meet academic expectations. However, what if students do not have the ability to take advantage of the learning opportunities being provided? The reality is that although such initiatives are beneficial for many students, there are those who still fall behind. Moreover, there are students who manage to keep pace but are still “at risk” of falling behind, particularly when faced with increased academic press or changes to their environment (such as when transitioning between primary, secondary and tertiary schooling and entering the workforce). Regardless of how well teachers teach or lessons are delivered, some learners still did not know or have not developed the skills needed to take advantage of these learning opportunities. Perhaps rather than looking at ways to help students meet academic standards, educators need to examine how to help students realize their learning potential. This is the basic distinction between the traditional practices of *educational equality* and those rooted in *educational equity*.

Equity assumes a more holistic approach to education, shifting focus from teaching methods to learning strategies. Within this framework, social and emotional learning strives to facilitate learner development of competencies that allow learners to capitalize on learning opportunities regardless of the environment they are in, both in and out of school, now and in learners’ futures.

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the “process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2015, p. 1). Generally speaking, this process involves recognizing and managing one’s emotions, and understanding the perspectives of others and working to develop positive relationships. These abilities culminate in the ability to overcome challenges and take advantage of learning opportunities in one’s environment. Within the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, these “skill sets” are defined as competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills and responsible decision-making.

As learning depends heavily on interpersonal relationships and because affect determines attitudes toward school and schooling, a variety of SEL programs have been developed and implemented. The success of these programs to assist students’ learning as well as behaviour in the classrooms has been documented, most notably by Durlak et al. (2011) who indicated that SEL programs not only improved problematic behaviour, such as class disruption, ineffective social interactions, truancy, and school withdrawal, but also appeared to contribute to academic gains on standardized achievement tests of up to 11 percentile points. In addition, the competencies acquired through SEL are pertinent to the workplace, where employers place a high value on such qualities as good social and communication skills, responsible decision making and the ability to manage oneself to work independently.

Despite growing interest, to date, little has been done to implement SEL programs into Japanese education, leaving SEL implementation to individuals and organizations, such as the SEL-8 programs (Koizumi, 2018). For the most part, SEL components can be found in special education environments where there is a particular emphasis on social skills training (SST) and emotional regulation. In Japanese general education settings, especially in subjects such as social studies and moral education, concepts such as social responsibility, positive social interaction and responsible decision making are couched in thematic units/ topics covering responsible citizenship, bullying and preparation for school events. However, what distinguishes successful SEL programs is that, rather than functioning as a side note or corollary, competencies are explicitly taught and practiced. Unfortunately, creating/finding opportunities to practice these competencies as well as a lack of familiarity, discourages teachers from integrating SEL instruction into an already full curriculum.

With communicative activities and a focus on learner affect, language learning classrooms lend themselves to SEL implementations. In fact, language learning significantly depends on processes that occur within and between learners; therefore, it is important that language educators look for opportunities to develop these social and emotional competencies (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017).

The SEL Project

SEL has proven successful for students in many other countries and I was interested in whether or not similar programs would benefit Japanese students, given the differences in culture and classroom environments. Moreover, was it possible to implement an SEL program that wouldn’t disrupt teachers’ already full schedules? With this question in mind, I began to develop a project with the aim of creating an SEL program that could be integrated in the existing curriculum of upper elementary and lower secondary classrooms. This is a particularly vulnerable time for adolescents as it is a time of transition, when issues of social status, peer relationships and self-identity come to the fore. It is also a developmentally challenging

time both physically and emotionally. Often, students who are unable to manage nascent emotions and strained and awkward relationships act out negatively.

I felt that this would be beneficial not only for students but also for faculty, and was something worth investigating and with guidance and support from the Education Guidance section, I was allowed to pursue this in my schools, so long as teachers were willing to participate. Despite a lot of interest, teacher buy-in proved to be the biggest challenge to implementing this program. Not only did teachers lack the time to implement this program, but they also didn't have the confidence to effectively manage student concerns within such a framework, and (to be honest) didn't have the confidence that such an approach would be effective. Providing resources helped to address this situation, in particular material related to mindset, grit and social skills training. Drawing from the grant fund, books in Japanese were distributed and shared. As well, resource material (i.e. charts, cards, worksheets etc.) were purchased that could be used to support instruction. Five teachers (three in upper elementary and two first year junior high school English teachers) decided to try out the program. I held two half-day workshops where teachers could better understand and practice SEL concepts. Participants also used this time to voice concerns and discuss questions and strategies for overcoming challenges. Together, we tweaked the program into a form that everyone felt comfortable implementing.

In order to make implementation easier, the program echoed a practice already in place in many elementary and junior high schools, where educators remind students of expected behaviors and attitudes with classroom "mottos" prominently displayed at the front of the class. The SEL competencies laid out by CASEL were distilled into teachable topics for which lessons and material were developed to support instruction. These topics included: practice Kindness (social skills), practice Active learning (self-management), practice Respect (social awareness), practice Mindfulness (self-awareness), and practice Ambition (responsible decision-making). Overarching the five competencies of SEL was the emphasis on *practice*, which communicated that not only were mistakes unavoidable, they were expected. Additionally, these topics together form the acronym K.A.R.M.A. a unifying theme involving the idea of reciprocity and responsibility. Self-knowledge extends from the individual through to responsible social agency, with the understanding that there is a natural flow of cause and effect. This places agency and responsibility of behaviour (and learning) in the hands of the individual student and asks everyone (students and teachers) to be responsible for their actions.

Narratives, roleplay and resulting discussions are effective ways for students to engage with ideas on a personal level, where the absence of right and wrong answers, affords students the chance to participate without losing face. Special education, in particular, use these techniques to present potentially complicated social concepts like empathy and responsibility in a way that is relatable and that can be manipulated by students. It is not surprising that many effective SEL programs incorporate these practices to support lesson delivery. Drawing from these practices, lessons were presented in scenarios framed by the question, "What does ~ look like?" In these scenarios, students could practice appropriate skills and were asked to think about the reasons behind particular behavior. English content, in a sense, assumed a "secondary" role. It served as the context with and within which students would engage with the SEL competency. For example, a common language lesson is feelings / condition (e.g., hungry / sad / thirsty / angry / happy etc.). For the lesson focusing on Mindfulness, this topic was expanded, asking students to think about underlying causes. That is, "I am happy because ..."; "Because he lost the game, he is ..."; "There is a test on Friday, so I feel ...) understanding the antecedents of behaviour (i.e. emotion) is an essential component to being able to understand and regulate behaviour, as well as to recognize and understand the motives of others (i.e., theory of mind).

Deeper learning was encouraged by asking students to keep a reflective journal of activities and situations outside of class where they were able to exercise what they had learned and observations about how successful (or unsuccessful) they were. These were fed back to myself and the homeroom teachers, who allocated time to go over journal entries. Follow-up classes also allowed for further roleplay activities and discussion for particularly problematic or common concerns. In addition, posters were prominently displayed reminding students of KARMA and to which teachers could refer throughout the day to remind and encourage students' expected behaviour.

The program consisted of 10 scheduled classes over the fall term with additional time for follow-up classes left to the homeroom and English teachers' discretion. Though no one dedicated a full class to addressing student concerns, teachers did report that they spent time addressing student concerns especially when presented with overlapping topics in other subjects such as social studies or moral education. By the end of this trial period, teachers commented that they felt more comfortable counselling and guiding students, especially when there was a framework to which they could refer. They also noticed a greater sense of learner autonomy in that students seemed more involved in regulating themselves and others. It was not uncommon, for example, to hear "practice kindness" or to read a student's contemplation of the motives behind a friend's actions. Although disruptive behaviour did not disappear altogether, teachers observed that classes seemed easier to manage and more importantly that when it came to discussing challenges with students, it was easier to work with a common "language" (i.e., framework, terms and expectations). For their part, students enjoyed the lessons, particularly the story-telling aspect, where they could determine the outcome of situation (for better or worse!). They also commented that it was easier to "see" their emotions and the reasons behind their own actions and the actions of others.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

The scope of this project was ambitious and it came from the desire to better understand how the differences of the Japanese educational environment would affect the implementation of a program that has seen dramatic success in other parts of the world. In hindsight, a more systematic and robust intervention would have provided an interesting foundation from which to build. For example, it would have been informative to have established standardized academic, emotional and behavioral baselines and to have implemented the intervention over a longer period of time. That said, this experience provided, not only myself but also the teachers and students involved, a better understanding of SEL and its potential for classrooms, language learning or otherwise. Three of the participating teachers continue to implement SEL in their current classes, modifying content around issues that they feel need more focus (e.g., academic responsibility and peer relationship). For myself, this project helped me better understand the concerns of teachers that need to be addressed before other similar programs can be developed and implemented. It provided insight into how SEL programs can be structured to support existing curricula and how SEL competencies are manipulated by students as they addressed issues such as いじめ (bullying) and 不登校 (school withdrawal), issues that are of particular concern in Japanese education. I don't doubt the benefits of SEL for students and teachers. However, implementing ideas, even the best ones, into practice is always difficult. Building from this experience, it is my hope that more effective SEL-based programs can be integrated into existing curricula to help educators prepare our students for successful outcomes both in and out of the classroom. In closing, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the JALT LD SIG. The possibility of this program and the insight gained would not have been possible without the support of the JALT LD SIG, whose grant helped secure the materials and resources used to make this program a reality. Thank you.

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