



Conflict Resolution Education and Social Emotional Learning Programs:

A critical comparison of school-based efforts

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Introduction:

How are programs in Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) similar and/or different? We hope that a critical comparison of these evolving programmatic efforts will assist practitioners and schools to decide which program is most useful to consider for implementation at a given point in time. In addition, we hope that our comparison of these two overlapping efforts will help to enhance collaborative efforts in the field and add conceptual clarity to these two important and complementary spheres of work.

This effort emerged from a collaborative project of the Conflict Resolution Education Network (CREnet) which brought together practitioners, researchers and youth to develop program and training standards for the field of conflict resolution - with one committee specifically looking at how the field of conflict resolution connects to related fields. Today, both SEL and CRE are used in a variety of settings and with children, adolescents and adults in schools and the workplace. Here we will focus on school-based, Kindergarten through 12th grade efforts.

In this paper, we will first describe CRE and SEL efforts in general and note core similarities and differences. There are many ways that one can delineate the nature of any psychosocial intervention. Here we will compare CRE and SEL efforts along five, overlapping dimensions: theories, goals, teaching methods, content covered and program implementation structure. Theory always shapes our goals. The actual teaching methods, content covered and the structures (or program implementation structure) we use to infuse content represent the specific ways that we seek to actualize our goals. Finally we will briefly discuss the implications of our comparative analysis

An overview:

In the last fifteen or so years, CRE efforts are more widely known and utilized in schools than SEL efforts. By definition CRE efforts have generally been

known to focus on one essential set of social and emotional skills - enhancing children's ability to recognize conflicts and resolve them in creative, flexible and non-violent ways (Johnson and Johnson, 1996). The field of CRE has developed from a number of specific movements (nonviolence, peace education, social justice and mediation) and has been influenced recently from the school reform movement which seeks to empower students in the design and implementation of their education, including decision-making and problem solving. More and more, practitioners are finding a natural link between these various fields and as a result are crafting a comprehensive field that is expanding beyond any one specific area into one which finds an integrated whole.

Social emotional learning on the other hand, is a new term for an age-old process. Since the beginning of formal education 3000 years ago, school life has always intentionally and unintentionally colored and shaped students social and emotional competencies. However, there have been a number of specific movements (progressive education, the Civil Rights, Women's and Affective Educational movements) and findings from child mental health and developmentally informed studies of resiliency that have focused educators and social scientists attention the importance of purposively enhancing social and emotional competencies (Cohen, 1999). In recent decades a growing body of empirical research findings have underscored what parents and teachers have long known: we can teach children social-emotional skills and promote related understandings that provide the foundation for health, responsibility and effective citizenry (Elias, et. al., 1997). Dan Goleman's book (1995) on emotional intelligence synthesized some of the relevant developmental research findings as well as the very positive behavioral and academic results emerging from effective SEL efforts in schools. Goleman's book spurred national interest in an idea that social-emotional capacities are as important - if not more so - than linguistic and mathematical abilities.

SEL programmatic efforts seek to promote social and emotional competencies or our capacity to understand, process, manage and express the social and emotional aspects of our lives. Social and emotional learning refers to what we do to promote these capacities or "modes of intelligence" (Gardner, 1983). SEL involves three, overlapping sets of processes: learning particular social-emotional skills; developing a greater understanding about social and emotional life (e.g. that emotional life always colors and shapes behavior); and, an attitude or set of values. Today, there are literally hundreds of social emotional learning (SEL) programmatic efforts that focus on varying age groups, sets of social-emotional skills and/or understandings.

Initially, many CRE programs were brought into schools to specifically teach students nonviolent ways to handle conflicts and to reduce violence-related behaviors. Initially, this was also a primary reason why many schools incorporated SEL efforts: to reduce violence. However, SEL efforts have always sought to positively influence the culture of the school and promote psychosocial abilities that provide the foundation for effective citizenry and responsible behavior.

There are a number of differences within the developing CRE as well as the

SEL world. Practitioners are attached to various theories or ideas about "what works", which to a greater or lesser extent influence goals as well as beliefs about the best methods to actualize particular goals.

Today, there is not "one" kind of CRE or SEL program. There are also many reasons why schools decide to implement a CRE and/or SEL programmatic efforts. For example, there are narrow as well as more holistic definitions and approaches to CRE efforts. The more narrow approaches to CRE focus on reducing the severity and intensity of conflicts within a school setting, often emphasizing the changing of individual behavior and implementing specific conflict reduction processes, such as mediation. The more comprehensive approaches seek to change not only individual conflict behavior but also to create a safer, more caring and just school culture (LeBlanc, Lacey & Mulder, 1998).

In fact, many of the more well known CRE programs use a comprehensive approach to CRE and easily see themselves not just focusing on conflict resolution, but also on SEL, anti-bias/diversity and student advocacy as well. For example, a comprehensive approach include a variety of program components, including: 1) social competency skill training including conflict resolution for adults and students, 2) peaceable classrooms, 3) curriculum instruction and integration, 4) school-wide positive discipline systems, 5) diversity/anti-bias awareness, 6) parent/community involvement and training, and 7) peer mediation and peace leadership.

SEL efforts - by definition - seek to promote a range of social and emotional skills and understandings, they vary with regard to what they focus on. There are many, many social and emotional skills/understandings that we need in life. Few programs seek to focus on all of them. Although all programs - in one way or another - explicitly focus on enhancing awareness of self and others, creating safe, caring and responsive relationships at school, problem solving/decision making, cooperative learning and conflict resolution, there is variability with regard to which additional skills and related sets of understandings are emphasized.

Another area of variability in the SEL world relates to how educators seek to infuse this learning in schools. Some practitioners have a conviction that it is most useful to first teach specific social and emotional skills (be it in a health education class or a "stand alone" course of study, just as we teach language arts or history as a course of study). The underlying idea here is that it is easiest for students to first learn the skills and then, to apply them to a range of situations. Others have a conviction that it is most useful to infuse SEL into all that we do: as we teach a given subject, run a morning meeting, manage the lunchroom or an athletic game. (Interestingly, practitioners who strongly favor the former model of infusion tend to work with more disadvantaged students and school systems.)

SEL efforts also vary with regard to the intended audience: regular education; children with special needs; and, SEL for educators (or providing opportunities for educators to pay attention to their own experiences in ways that will enhance empathic and educative efforts). Some programs explicitly

focus on all three audiences and others focus on only one (Cohen, 1999).

Theory:

Our theories always shape our goals. Our theories (e.g. about the nature of learning, teaching, childhood, health) may be conscious and/or unrecognized, rational and/or irrational, linked to current research or not. In any case, they shape and color how we see the world. There are also different levels of "theory": a theory can refer to a systematically organized set of ideas that explains circumstances in a wide variety of settings or it may refer to accepted principles and rules of procedure devised to analyze, predict the nature of behavior. There is not one theory that underlies the many programs and perspectives that now exist in the worlds of CRE and SEL.

In general, with CRE the field has emerged from a variety of theoretical backgrounds, including peace education, non-violence, social justice, conflict competence, and educational reform issues of school climate and improved academics, among others. The theories behind the peace education movement helped show that students' and communities can not only reduce or resolve conflicts but can achieve real peace - both personal and cultural. The theoretical basis for conflict competence helps show that individuals and groups can learn practical skills and processes to help manage conflicts nonviolently (Benard, 1991). And specific theories in educational reform movement which focus on the interrelationship between creating a safe cooperative school climate and improved academic performance brings a depth to the field which is critically important (Arends, 1998; Joyce, Hersh, Hartoonian, 1993).

No one theory seems to dominate those working in the field and practitioners working with youth often take their own specific theoretical approaches. More and more, though, comprehensive programs are bringing together the influences of more than one theory and many now are being influenced by the theoretical basis of education reform, which help schools get beyond "one shot" conflict resolution trainings and stand alone peer mediation programs.

Our impression is that there are currently three organizing theoretical models that drive much of the work in the SEL world: cognitive behavioral theory (which underscores that notion that we can teach children specific skills in particular ways); emerging developmentally informed theoretical models (which teach us about the powerful and prophylactic value of developing particular sets of social-emotional competencies); and, systems theory (which underscore the necessity of working with a series of inter-related systems - child, classroom., school-as-a-whole; school-home-community -- to effect meaningful and lasting school reform. But, there are many of theoretical models that - to a greater or lesser extent - influence how practitioners think and work in the classroom: progressive educational ideas; feminist theory; psychoanalytically informed theory and certainly the theories that have shaped CRE thinking and practice.

Goals:

All SEL programs - by definition - seek to promote social and emotional competencies. What varies is which specific goals and related sets of understandings and values or attitude they focus on. A primary goal in virtually all SEL programmatic efforts is the creation of a safe, caring and responsive classroom and school. Emerging from the idea or theory that this is the foundation for all learning -- social-emotional and otherwise - it is considered the first step (or goal) in effective SEL efforts.

Building on a safe, caring and responsive classroom/school, virtually all SEL programmatic efforts have the following explicit and specific goals: to promote awareness of self and others; to promote students' ability to use this awareness to become more effective problem solvers/decision maker (which always includes more mindful and effective mediators); to develop cooperative abilities; and, to become more able to manage emotional life. Most programs also include the following goals: to build healthy, responsive relationships; to develop listening and communication abilities; to be helpful to others; to become more self-motivating; to be able to say "no"; and, sometimes, to develop a more realistic and positive sense of themselves. These goals include skills, understandings and to a greater or lesser extent, an attitude. Some programmatic efforts emphasize particular goals, like learning about diversity or learning about ourselves through the study of literature. Most programmatic efforts are explicit about the skill-related goals. Although they are often less explicit less specific about what understandings and attitudes they seek to enhance, all agree that SEL efforts represent more than skill-based training alone (Elias, et.al. 1997).

The goals of CRE programs, like SEL programs, are varied. Yet in general most agree that conflict resolution education seeks to not only resolve conflicts but also to build safe, caring and just relationships. In addition, many CRE programs seek not only to change individual relationships but also to create culture change in which people work together as a community to create a place where all feel safe, act compassionately, and stand up against injustice. To date, some of the key goals of CRE include:

1. Preventing violence & creating a safe and caring school climate
2. Fostering responsible citizenship
3. Creating systemic change in discipline, communication, collaborative decision making and problem solving within the school community
4. Fostering social justice where everyone is treated equally
5. Creating more effective agents for social change
6. Promoting important life skills, including anger management, impulse control, conflict management and effective communication

The goal of social justice in CRE programs is one that not all practitioners adhere to and one that is often difficult within public educational settings to implement. However, strong support exists within the CRE community to include this goal and in fact, many see this goal as a key, even unique factor that defines CRE and helps bridge SEL to diversity and anti-bias educational goals.

What we mean here is that while SEL goals may simplistically be seen to create personal and social "health," diversity and anti-bias goals may simplistically be seen to create social and personal "justice." CRE works to bridge both of these goals. The specific conflict resolution processes of facilitated dialogue and problem solving links personal and social health with personal and social justice.

Content:

Program goals determine the content we seek to cover. Hence, it is not surprising that there is somewhat of a range of the content covered in SEL programmatic efforts today. There is no yet a consensus within the SEL world about what content necessarily needs to be included in an effective SEL programmatic effort. A review of scores of programs reveals that many programs attempt to cover the following seven basic - and to some extent, overlapping - areas of content:

- * enhancing awareness of self and others;
- * problem solving/decision making (which importantly includes the ability to recognize and resolve conflicts in creative and non-violent ways);
- * emotional self-regulation (impulse control);
- * communication skills;
- * self-motivation;
- * cooperative learning; and,
- * to a greater or lesser extent, developing a more realistic sense of self and positive self-image.

Within CRE, one might see seven basic content areas:

- * Community building activities (skills, attitudes and principles)
- * Understanding conflict
- * Emotional competence abilities
- * Communication skills
- * Problem solving skills and processes

- * Valuing diversity
- * Social justice/organizing for change

Teaching Methodology:

There is a wide range of teaching methods that are used in both SEL and CRE programs to foster learning in the content areas described above. They are much the same and focus on the interest of providing an experiential, student-centered and diverse set of strategies for meeting the needs of the "whole child."

They include: community building, skill practice, role-playing, coaching & feedback, directed instruction & demonstration, modeling (during & after lessons), brainstorming, class meetings, paired sharing, cooperative grouping, applied experiences and practice opportunities for students (e.g. service learning projects, co-teaching, mentoring, academic controversy, curricula infusion (e.g. literature-based SEL), individual storytelling, arts expression (drama, play, art, music), and teambuilding activities

Program Implementation Structure:

When we decide upon what we want to teach (content) and the ways that will teach it (teaching methodology), there are a range of ways that educators can implement programmatic efforts: program implementation structure or what others have called modes of infusion.

There is a spectrum of ways that both CRE and SEL are programmatically implemented into school life. At one end of the spectrum are "stand alone" courses. Just as we teach language arts or history as a separate "stand alone" course, SEL can be and sometimes is taught in the same manner. For example, in New Haven Connecticut, every student in every school takes a "Social Development" course K through 12 (Shriver, Schwab-Stone & DeFalco, 1999) and in Fort Collins Colorado, every incoming 6th grade student takes a conflict resolution course. These courses are quite prescriptive: teachers receive detailed lesson plans for every class.

There are also many SEL and CRE curriculums that can be used as a "stand alone" course or integrated into existing pedagogic practice. For example, the Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program is a SEL example of this for elementary and middle school children (Elias & Bruene-Butler, 1999). Similarly, the Productive Conflict Resolution Program is an example of how it can be used either as a stand-alone conflict resolution or mediation course or as a set of practices that can be integrated into existing classroom and school-wide activities for all teachers in all disciplines.

There are other programs/perspectives a bit further along this continuum that present a point of view about children, education and the range of ways that we can promote SEL or CRE in our classrooms and schools. These programs can not be used as a "strand alone" curriculum. Instead they present a menu of activities (e.g. how to think about and conduct morning meetings) and

points of view about class life (e.g. discipline and classroom management) that educators can integrate into any and everything that they are doing (Charney, Crawford & Wood, 1999).

Finally, there are points of view about childhood, development and learning that are intended to inform everything that an educator does. For example, in the Tel Aviv SEL program - "The Wisdom of the Heart Program" -- all Kindergarten classrooms have a "dream corner" where students can tell other students and teachers their dreams and have them acted out. This learning and sharing underscores the notion that some of our experience is colored and shaped by unrecognized or unconscious factors, which we can learn about (Marans & Cohen, 1999). Or, valuing and integrating arts education into our school is another important example of a perspective that compliments and promotes SEL: freeing our imagination fosters discovery and self-awareness.

Likewise in CRE, there are certain educational practices and theories - such as student-centered learning, experiential education and internal locus of control- that inform and guide many educators implementing CRE programs.

Different teachers and different schools or districts - like individuals - have their own particular set of goals, needs, strengths and weaknesses. As a result different educational communities may be ready for and/or want a given program implementation structure -- in the classroom -- at a particular point in time.

Many conflict resolution programs have focused on peer mediation or peer negotiation because it represents a smaller, more manageable project to sell and implement. Again, the field of CRE emphasizes the importance of developing comprehensive programs which go beyond isolated, stand-alone efforts. In fact, the National Curriculum Integration Project (www.ncip.org) was created to address this issue by creating a comprehensive, integrated approach to CRE and helping schools move beyond peer mediation or negotiation only.

Program Implementation Structure also relates to how a given CRE or SEL program is implemented in the larger system of school, home and community. In the SEL and CRE worlds, there has been a growing recognition that effective SEL efforts necessarily need to include multi-year planning that involves a partnership between educator, parents and optimally community representative from the beginning of the planning process. In fact, there is mounting evidence that this is an essential component of effective school reform (Melaville, 1998) and is certainly one of the five core principles that characterized effective SEL efforts (Cohen, in press). Otherwise, these efforts will become the latest in a series of educational "fads" and effect no meaningful school reform.

Conclusion:

As more and more schools take greater responsibility for providing a well rounded education for our nation's youth in this time of school violence, it is

important that practitioners and educators alike to see the connections between the overlapping fields of CRE and SEL. As we learn how SEL and CRE are similar and different we can then find ways of working together towards our similar goals.

The developing fields of CRE and SEL have overlapping goals. For example, both fields are invested in providing social, emotional and problem solving competencies. Where the goals diverge, such as in emphasizing social justice and change with CRE and in emphasizing a healthy, whole child with SEL, each field can and are beginning to inform each other in helpful ways.

Depending upon one's point of view, each field might be seen as an umbrella for the other. Rather than seeing one field as more comprehensive or complete than the other, we might see them as emphasizing a certain part of the overall spectrum of educational, social-emotional and social justice issues. As we have seen, these two fields are increasingly overlapping in their goals, content and methods. We believe that what is most important is to develop collaborative ways to learn from each other and to serve in collaborative and synergistic ways. In this way, both fields can work together to educate our youth to become healthy, productive members of a civil society.

We believe that it is also fundamentally important that we clearly and systematically study what we are actually doing in our CRE and SEL efforts so that we will learn what is most helpful for which children and why. In the CRE world, the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program and ESR in partnership with the Columbia University School of Public Health have taken an important step in this regard. Findings from the first stage of a study examining 7,000 NYC public school children revealed that effective CRE efforts have a small but nationally significant effect on academic achievement, how student think and behavior (Aber, et. al. 1998). The Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (casel.org) has taken national leadership in the SEL world in a variety of ways, including a current comparative evaluation and assessment of over 200 SEL programmatic efforts.

It is our hope that practitioners and researchers in these overlapping fields work together to build a coordinated approach for our youth. It will be up to each of us to be role models for creating and implementing such collaborative efforts. We have much to learn from each other. We hope with this article that readers will better understand the similarities and differences between these intersecting fields.

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