



Socio-Emotional Development

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and community settings, and integrate within society. Disruptions in socio-emotional development typically lead to many of the deeply challenging and problematic behaviors that teachers often experience in classrooms. Possessing an understanding of socio-emotional development and related attributes is one of the most crucial factors in determining how students adapt in schools, form peer relationships, and develop self-confidence, relationship skills, self-management, and emotional competencies required for successful participation in group learning (Thompson & Happold, 2002).

Overview

Children's socio-emotional development is central to how well they attach to their primary caregivers, adapt in educational and community settings, and integrate within society. Disruptions in socio-emotional development typically lead to many of the deeply challenging and problematic behaviors that teachers often experience in classrooms. Possessing an understanding of socio-emotional development and related attributes is one of the most crucial factors in determining how students adapt in schools, form peer relationships, and develop self-confidence, relationship skills, self-management, and emotional competencies required for successful participation in group learning (Thompson & Happold, 2002).

Socio-emotional competence has been described as "cooperative and pro-social behavior, instigation and continuation of peer friendships and adult relationships, appropriate management of aggression and conflict, development of a sense of mastery and self worth and emotional regulation and reactivity" (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006, p. 33). Young children between the ages of 0 to 3 depend on their relationships with adults to teach them about themselves and they world in which they live. Thompson and Happold (2002) noted that "child-adult relationships have a more significant impact on a child's learning than educational toys or pre-school curricula" (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006, p. 33). Parents play an important role in securing an appropriate and healthy environment for their children (NIMH, 2000). Research also suggests that environments that are abusive, difficult and intimidating place young children at risk of impairments in their social-emotional development (Aviles,

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Teaching Pyramid

Anderson, & Davila, 2006, p. 33). Four main potential risk factors that risk a child's socio-emotional competence include:

- Early childhood trauma;
- Family discord and volatility;
- Participation in the child welfare system; and
- Neighborhood peril and inadequate means (Barbarin, 2000).

With the multiple risk factors experienced in today's urban environments, particularly, daily trauma is a risk factor that cannot be avoided.

Family Systems & Attachment

Central to educator understanding regarding potential risk factors and school difficulties, educational professionals should develop a rudimentary understanding of family systems theory and attachment. Psychologists have reported that many of the roles we play in our families and the attachments that we make are integrally related to how we behave in other environments. Briefly, family systems are characterized by

- Wholeness and order, although this order could be dysfunctional;
- Hierarchical structures, and
- Adaptive self-organization (Cox & Paley, 2003, p. 193).

Sroufe & Waters (1977) described attachment as "an organizational construct that integrated development in the domains of affect, cognition, and behavior during infancy and served as a foundation for social and emotional development during infancy" (as reported in Vaughn, 2005, p. 371).

Contrasted with bonding, the attachment experience is not limited to the first weeks or months of life, but rather it is a gradual and interactive process in the child's responses and feelings

toward the child's caregiver (Mercer, 2006, p. 50). While there are multiple aspects of the attachment experience, disrupted attachment occurs when the primary caregiver's relationship to the child is characterized by risk factors (p. 51). Teachers may not understand how or why the child's behaviors are problematic, but many theorists suggest a correlation between disrupted attachment and impaired socio-emotional development that later manifests in a school environment.

These correlations become more obvious as children progress through stages of development (such as those that Piaget described) and they face risk factors impairing appropriate socio-emotional developmental processes. These risk factors can impair socio-emotional development and progress can be deeply impacted. One potential way they could be affected is with difficulties in reading and probable difficulties in writing creatively (Barr, 2001). Unknown by many educators, exposure to early childhood trauma, violence in either the home or community environments, or abuse or neglect directly interferes with a child's socio-emotional development and as a result children may suffer from intellectual, cognitive, and academic impairments (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky, & Semel, 2001). These impairments should be considered as a potential for academic problems, social problems with peers, and other impaired attachment behaviors. Other inappropriate behaviors such as expressing unusual directness, requiring inappropriately close adult proximity, or insecurity might be indicators of complicated attachment relationships (Vaughn, 2005, p. 373). Typically, normal attachment reflects the "operation of a secure base relationship" and directly relates to age-appropriate adaptation (p. 373). Attachment is deeply evocative of how children will behave in school and with other adults.

Applications

Promoting Socio-Emotional Development

The Teaching Pyramid

One method of promoting socio-emotional development is the teaching pyramid. The teaching pyramid is a three-tiered model of classroom strategies that promote socio-emotional development for all children while specifically supporting and addressing the needs of children that are "at-risk for or who have challenging behaviors" (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). The model was designed to be implemented by educational professionals with support from mental health professionals and is supported by two primary assumptions:

- That there is a strong relationship between children's socio-emotional development, communication skills, and problematic behavior.
- That in order to address the needs of these problematic behaviors all of the professionals working to alleviate these behaviors need a range of strategies (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006, p. 587-88).

Behavioral strategies are aimed at four levels of practice with the first two purposed toward improving relationships and designing supportive environments. These are considered “universal” approaches and benefit everyone. The next two are aimed at teaching social and emotional compensatory strategies with the “targeted” level directed at providing intensive, individualized instruction. Within these constructs, specific characteristics utilized in promotion and prevention practices include:

- Evaluating physical settings where children spend the majority of their time,
- Providing predictable schedules, routines, transitions, activity type, size, length, and expectations,
- Behavioral demands, and
- Teacher behaviors (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006, p. 592).

The basic implication attributed to implementing the teaching pyramid is that most problem behaviors exhibited by children are most likely to be found and alleviated by examining and modifying adult responses to problem behaviors (p. 593). In other words, adults must examine their own assumptions and make flexible changes to accommodate the needs of their students. Positive adult relationships with students are central to providing support to students.

Cultural Influences

Another contribution to behavioral integration and modification are the individual and culturally based assumptions and beliefs experienced by adults working with children of specific backgrounds who behave in seemingly inappropriate ways. Professionals may have pre-set notions and assumptions about certain groups and populations. These beliefs may directly affect socio-emotional development expectations. In outlining specific attributes of the teaching pyramid, Vaughn (2006) expressed a high level of importance in constructing collaborative relationships with parents and families in order to promote healthy relationships, foster different perspectives, and offer the possibility of expanding viewpoints. These diverse perspectives were reported as deeply helpful in cultivating dialogue to implement a “multitiered approach to supporting young children’s social-emotional competence and decreasing the incidence of challenging behavior” (p. 597). All of these constructs lead to developing and fostering a “system of diversity” for classrooms in chaos.

Resilience

Walsh (1998) defined resilience in families as the “capacity to rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful” (p. 4). According to Walsh, “Highly resilient people reached out for help when needed, turning to kin, social, and religious support systems, as well as helping professionals” (p. 64). For children experiencing socio-emotional developmental impairments, resilience is an “ongoing dynamic process rather than a static characteristic of children and adolescents” and prevention programs that promote resilience especially for youth in peril

should be “long term and geared toward assisting high-risk youth across successive periods of development” (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002, p. 16).

Benard (1993) suggested that resiliency could be described “as the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks” (p. 44). O’Connell-Higgins (1994) stated that unlike the term “survivor,” resiliency emphasized that potential subjects were able to ‘snap back’ in order to complete the important developmental tasks that confront them as they grow. Resilience suggests that people do more than merely get through difficult emotional experiences, hanging on to inner equilibrium by a thread (p. 1).

Tusaie and Dyer (2004) wrote that “individuals who do experience disruption from stress but then use personal strengths to grow stronger and function above the norm are considered resilient” (p. 3). Resilience is “not static” (p. 3), but is instead a cluster of processes that enable individuals to adapt to risks that are unavoidable in life that include increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. “The impact of stressors involved with these risks accumulated over time and posed risks to the health and mental health of everyone” (Heldring, 2004, p. 67).

O’Connell-Higgins argued that resilience, like growth itself, was a developmental phenomenon propelled by vision and stamina that evolves over time (p. 319). She further indicated that adult individuals who commonly possessed characteristics of resilience often shared a variety of common traits. They were often above average to superior intelligence and possess exceptional talents, which include highly developed creativity and other inner resources. Adult individuals possessing resilience commonly have obtained higher economic levels than their family of origin and demonstrate high levels of ego development; have sustained close, empathically attuned relationships in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Interestingly, resilient individuals often have psychologically compromised siblings and maintain strong political and social activism (p. 20). These indicators directly impact strategies for developing best programs for individuals with impaired socio-emotional development. These traits should be evaluated and taught to students as a direct instruction for how to integrate a new conceptual framework to make adaptations within the socio-emotional developmental construct.

Students

Based on research collected from multiple sources, the impacts of socio-emotional development on success in childhood are broad and not only affect children, but parents, teachers, and peers. For students, early indicators of problem behaviors include: temperamental difficulties, aggression, language difficulties, and non-compliance (Stormont, 2002). Interventions for students should target the child’s ability to express their emotions appropriately, “regulate their emotions, solve common problems, build positive relationships with their peers and adults in their environment, and engage and persist in challenging tasks” (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006, p. 585). In order for children to be adequately prepared to cope with societal and community functions,

coping behaviors must be nurtured. Bullying, non-compliance, inappropriate anger, and aggressive behavior are symptoms of socio-emotional developmental impairments. Additionally, children may not know how to express ways of sharing their experiences or feelings meaningfully with adults. Adults must offer strategies to help children construct these conversations.

Teachers

Early education teachers often feel unprepared to handle challenging behaviors effectively (Buscemi, Bennett, Thomas, & Deluca, 1995; Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham, 2006). It is for this reason that teachers need to understand how socio-emotional development impacts school settings (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006, p. 34). Additionally, teachers of adolescents must understand the behavioral manifestations of ways specific behaviors are presented and the connection to potential abuse. All teachers should be vigilant in their observations and realize that outbursts or other negative behaviors may be significantly connected to underlying home issues the child is potentially attempting to hide. Also prevalent and of significant concern is in disciplining the child by suspending the student from school. Researchers have indicated multiple ways that this form of discipline further exacerbated the child's difficulties in school, because this caused more missed assignments and other difficulties in negotiating multiple aspects of the school environment (p. 34).

While the role of attachment begins between the parent and child, teachers play a central role in providing a secure relationship with children in a classroom environment. A child's future development and ability to operate within various social and physical environments depends significantly on attachment (Vaughn, 2006, p. 372). Teachers should be aware of different behavior management programs that can be enlisted to initiate positive changes. The Teaching Pyramid is an example of a program that teachers can utilize to help students with difficulties. To learn more about other programs, teachers and paraprofessionals that work directly with troubled children "should be given professional development to gain knowledge of socio-emotional needs of children and tools for best recognizing these needs" (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006, p. 36). Teachers have a responsibility to understand the broad scope of services that schools provide in helping children to be successful in multiple ways. From this framework, teachers should develop a substantial understanding of critical roles within the school environment. These roles are often not provided within educational programs, and roles are often confused with titles.

Counselors & Psychologists

For example, while the role of the school counselor sounds like a true mental health role, often the school counselor's role varies in terms of practice, especially between elementary schools and secondary schools. For example, within the elementary school, counselors sometimes provide conflict resolution, administer character education classes, and provide administrative support for discipline issues. At the secondary level, school counselors typically provide services that have more to do with scheduling

classes than in providing mental health support services. Although this role and the amount of time spent on tasks depends on how individual schools and school districts define these roles.

School psychologists also have a confusing role both at the elementary and secondary levels. While it seems that school psychologists have a direct responsibility in providing mental health type services, teachers should understand that school psychologists typically administer the bulk of special education testing in a given educational environment. The work of the school psychologist usually drives the special education department at a given school. The school psychologist might share a small portion of overlapping responsibilities with the school counselor, but many times the roles of these professionals are confusing, because they both sound more like they are heavily tied to mental health services. It is very important for teachers to understand multiple behavior modification strategies and interventions for socio-emotional developmental impairments. Teachers are encouraged to ask questions and seek answers in educational environments where they are hired. Teachers should also note that most times they will be expected to seek understanding rather than having all of the roles explained by the professionals engaging these roles.

Administrators

Administrators play a key role in providing support to the educational team, acting as a resource as needed and facilitating much of the behavior management programs in given schools. Within these constructs, administrators should understand the statistical aspects of behavioral issues in educational environments and serve as both a consultant and professional development leader for the educational team. Another role that administrators play is in providing professional development trainers to teach teachers and other educational staff in ways that can help children with socio-emotional developmental impacts.

Issues

Overcoming Barriers to Socio-Emotional Development

Multiple barriers exist that hinder socio-emotional development. The first barrier is related to family systems structures. Secure attachment begins at home and is based on nurturing emotionally sensitive relationships between children and their caregivers. When these relationships lack a secure attachment, children have the potential for barriers to appropriate socio-emotional development. One way to overcome this potential barrier is for parents to attend parenting classes. Parenting classes are typically designed to ensure that parents have the knowledge and skills needed to provide the nurturing, positive care that promotes "healthy development" (Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006, p. 28).

Another significant barrier to promoting socio-emotional development is a shortage of school personnel directly funded to deliver mental health services and focus their efforts directly on the socio-emotional development of children. Much of these limitations are due to a lack of federal and state funds. Teacher

education programs should more strongly emphasize the role of socio-emotional development and its part in producing healthy and resilient students (Avila, Anderson, & Davila, 2006, p. 37).

Conclusion

This article purposed to improve understanding of the importance of socio-emotional development and its relevance in school settings. Several elements of the socio-emotional developmental process were presented in order to provide a brief overview into the multiple aspects of socio-emotional developmental process. These aspects included the roles of attachment, family systems theory, resilience, and potential training for schools to utilize designed to help children develop socially and emotionally.

The main difficulty for educators in understanding children's socio-emotional development is in not understanding attachment barriers the child may have experienced earlier in life. These attachment barriers are predictors for academic and behavioral impairments in the classroom environment. Teachers are often the beneficiaries of problem behaviors, which were likely formed within the home environment. Another significant conclusion is in understanding that children having difficulties in school often have parents with similar difficulties. Some parents have a negative attitude regarding school. These assumptions then are projected onto their own children and impact the child's socio-emotional development and academic progress. Teachers need to be aware of these issues and approach parent relationships gently and positively.

Terms & Concepts

Attachment Theory: An organizational construct that integrates development in the domains of affect, cognition, and behavior during infancy and serves as a foundation for social and emotional development during infancy (Vaughn, 2005).

Family Systems Theory: Family systems are characterized by (a) wholeness and order, although this order could be dysfunctional; (b) hierarchical structures, and (c) adaptive self-organization. These structures operate within the framework of the family organization characterized by an open, living system, open to adaptation or challenges

Resilience: Resilience is characterized by the capacity to rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful.

Socio-Emotional Development: Social emotional development can be viewed as the intertwined and interdependent foundational relationship that fosters healthy attachment, appropriate socialization in multiple environments, and success in school and other cultures.

Teaching Pyramid: The Teaching Pyramid is a model for promoting young children's social-emotional development while addressing challenging behavior and its link to critical outcomes for children, families, and other childhood programs (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006).

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