

The Importance of Teacher Social and Emotional Competence

By Tish Jennings

Recently published online in the AERA journal *Review of Educational Research* is an extensive theoretical [article](#) presenting the Prosocial Classroom Model that highlights the importance of teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC) and well-being to their ability to provide social, emotional, and instructional support to their students. The paper reviews current research suggesting a relationship between SEC and teacher burnout and reviews intervention efforts to support teachers' SEC through stress reduction and mindfulness programs. We also propose a research agenda to address the potential efficacy of intervention strategies designed to promote teacher SEC and improved learning outcomes for students. In collaboration with Dr. Mark Greenberg, I wrote this article to establish a foundation in the literature for a new area of research exploring teacher psychosocial factors associated with good student outcomes and ways to promote them.

As a former teacher and teacher educator, I am acutely aware of the social and emotional challenges teachers face. If you have never worked as a teacher, imagine the emotional stress associated with being responsible for the academic achievement and social and emotional learning of an energetic crowd of 25-30 children, diverse in race, ethnicity, social economic status, academic achievement, parent support, and social and emotional skill level. Imagine getting and keeping their attention then helping them stay on task, not to mention helping them do well on high-stakes tests and get along with their peers. Imagine being faced daily with at least a handful of children in this crowd who cannot regulate their emotions, attention, and behavior very well causing regular interruptions, disruptions and conflicts. In most cases, you face this crowd alone; you cannot leave this emotional pressure cooker to take a break when you are upset or even to go to the bathroom! Is it any wonder that 50% of teachers leave the profession within five years?

I spent 15 years teaching classroom management and supervising student teachers as Director of Intern Teachers in a teacher education program. As I spent many hours observing, critiquing, and coaching these novice teachers, I began to notice that they often lacked the degree of emotional self-awareness and self-regulation necessary to successfully apply the behavior management strategies I had taught them in class. Sometimes they reacted emotionally to a student's disruptive behavior unconsciously in ways that actually exacerbated the behavior and provoked a power struggle. I watched some teachers begin to burnout even in their first year. Teachers attempting to suppress emotional expression while feeling highly aroused became emotionally exhausted. This exhaustion led to depersonalization. Rather than recognizing that the disruptive child was suffering from poor regulation and trying to help them, they began to interpret the child's behavior as a personal attack. The child became "a little monster" or "just trouble." By the end of the year, some of these teachers felt like failures and were ready to throw in the towel. It was my responsibility to help them become successful teachers and I wondered why teacher education didn't address these issues.

As I made the transition from educator to scientist, I wanted to tackle this problem. As I sifted through the library databases, I realized that very little research has addressed the issues of teacher emotional stress, SEC and performance and that I could make an important contribution by reviewing a broad body of research in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology to develop a theoretical model explaining the importance of SEC to classroom and student outcomes. I invited my friend and colleague Mark Greenberg to join me in this project because of his strong background in developing and testing the PATHS SEL program and his understanding of the importance of teacher SEC to successful SEL program implementation.

As a result of this review, we developed the Prosocial Classroom Model that highlights the importance of teachers’ SEC and well-being in the development and maintenance of supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and successful SEL program implementation. The model proposes that these factors contribute to creating a classroom climate that is more conducive to learning that promotes positive student outcomes. This model informs our ongoing research. We are leading an intervention development project, a collaborative effort between Penn State University’s Prevention Research Center and the Garrison Institute, to complete the development and preliminary testing of the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education™ (CARE) professional development program for teachers. We recently received notice of an award from the US Department of Education Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) that will support this project.

“The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes” by Patricia Jennings and Mark Greenberg is now published & available online at <http://rer.sagepub.com> under the link “Online First.”

You can dowload the full article at: <http://rer.sagepub.com/cgi/rapidpdf/0034654308325693v1>

The Prosocial Classroom Model

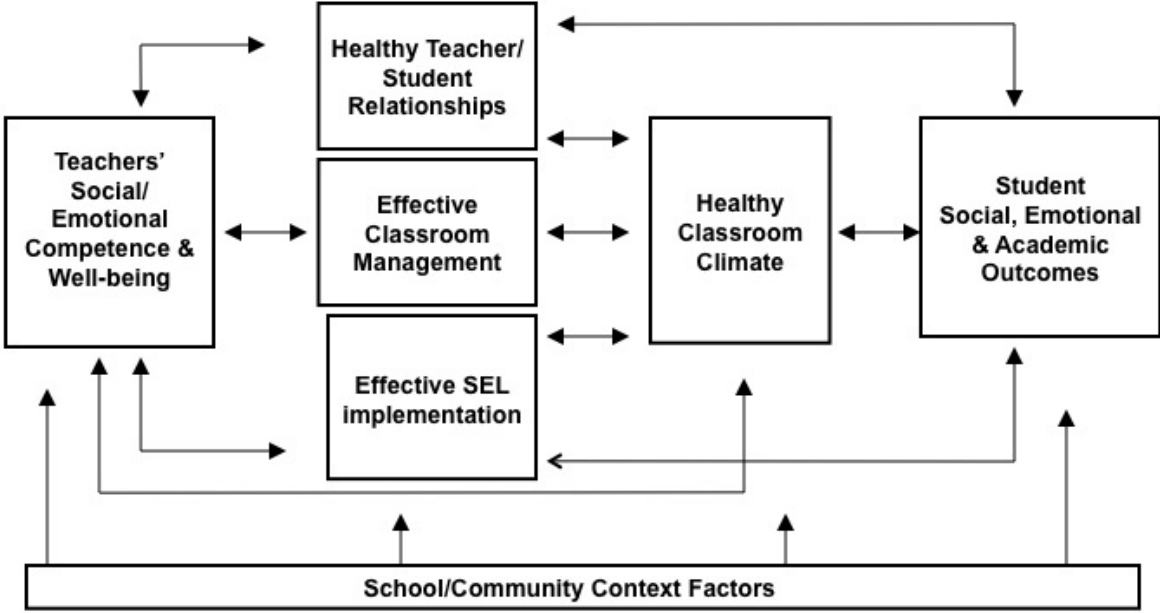


Figure 1. The Prosocial Classroom: A Model of Teacher Social and Emotional Competence and Classroom and Student Outcomes.

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