



## SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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### Abstract:

In classrooms, the students spend lots of time by interacting each other. This paper debates the role of importance of the schools for rising students' social relations. Interaction between students is inevitable. That is because, they are together in projects, class discussion and peer working groups. Multicultural diverse school climates demand more flexible, meaningful, productive humanly relations. These relations circulate in every age and environment as Bronfenbrenner (1979)' hierarchy model. Researches for this issue manifest scientific application to this notion (Goleman, 1995; Ellias et al., 1997) from the perspective of social emotional learning. Successful researches have been conducting from all over the world mainly in U.S. and European countries and Australia. Educational psychology researchers have very important mission in this curricula issue.

**Keywords:** school; social relation; social emotional learning

### 1. Introduction

School is not only a place where children learn reading, writing, math or languages; it is also a place where they learn acceptable communication and social skills with each other. Thus, successful schools not only provide good learning environments in terms of academic units, but also they should ensure a social environment to enhance students' social and communication skills; especially it is a necessity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is more diverse, multicultural and challenging regarding to social and ecological environment than previous times (Greenberg et. al, 2003).

Students differ in their cultural background, family structure, personal features (Good & Brophy, 1984). Any average student spends about eight hours working day and daily light time in the school with their peers. The consuming of this time continues in the evenings and at weekends with courses such as etudes and programs. Student – centered classes require communication, relation and interaction between the students

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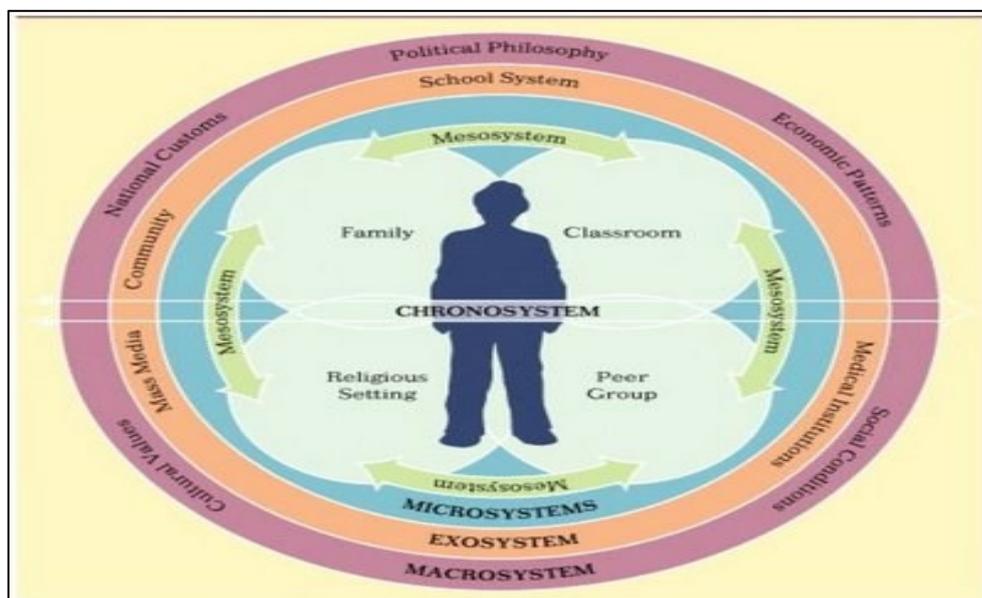
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via peer group study, group discussion and projects in short context of group process and friendship (Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001).

However, schooling is a complex process and becoming more complex in this diverse world day by day; there are different set of social components such as teachers, students, parents and administrators who have different goals and roles; as well as, all those social components consist of individuals with different personalities, experiences, ethnicities, cultures, socio-economic status and backgrounds; that makes relations even more complicated and interrelated. In addition to all, these complex relations are also affected by government policy, educational policy, curriculum, changing cultures, technology, media, innovations, scientific developments, changing social layers or politics; in short, schools are micro models of society where knowledge, culture, relations, behaviors or emotions are reproduced in, inevitably and constantly. The sociological context of schools is complicated because it consists in multiple levels and relations between varieties of people in a common setting (Frank, 1998).

The explaining of complexity of the schools in terms of complicated relations could help to understand one side of the coin regarding to improve social skills of a child; actually, it is also a general sociological perspective to evaluate the role of the schools in terms of social relations. However, to analyze the process more clearly; educators, experts or practitioners in the field should take into account the uniqueness of every child; they should evaluate the process not only from a sociological perspective but also from a developmental (psychological) perspective (Pianta, 2000).

In order to understand those nested structures regarding to child's development process which involves social and individual levels; it is suitable to consider through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory. He defined different systems to explain the effects of the environment on child's development (Bronfenbrener, 1994). The complex relationships between levels and settings, which were mentioned above, are becoming more understandable according to his model; and also he did not neglect the uniqueness of every child (see Figure1).



**Figure 1:** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory Model (concentric circles)

As it can be seen through the model (concentric circles), there are five types of systems – macrosystem, exosystem, microsystem, mesosystem, and chronosystem- each one has an effect on child’s development; in other words, child’s development reflects all systems separately. Each setting represents a part of the environment that is significant on the development process.

When the model is adapted to the school base, the child is in the centre as a student and as a developing person at the same time. The microsystem symbolizes the closer part of the ecological environment in terms of face to face basis; direct relationships are defined through microsystems such as peer, teacher-student, and student-administrator relations in the school. The mesosystem is two microsystems’ interrelation, for instance the connection between a child’s school environment and home environment could be the most significant example; there are two intersecting worlds and more than one element which do directly or indirectly affect child’s development. More specifically regarding to the school context, the interactions with other classroom students, with other peer groups in the school may alter and impact the development process of a child among the mesosystem level. The exosystem is the indirect environment, which could be both formal and informal such as teachers’ personal environment or teachers’ working conditions and their effects on teachers’ performance in the school; the relations between school and community; the psychical environment in other words the neighborhood of the school; or school’s interaction with other schools. All these indirect relations still affect the child. Macrosystem is the larger context, being effective on child’s development, for instance national educational policy and curriculum could be the most distinct examples. Finally, chronosystem includes environmental events, socio-historical circumstances and transitions over the life course. The chronosystem represents either the events which influence all school members or personal events which only alter child’s life (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979).

According to ecological model, although students have same macrosystems or partly same exosystems, they have completely different microsystems or mesosystems, as well as they have different experiences and significant life events (chronosystem) in their lives. Thus, when we consider about the improvement of social relations of a child, we should think about all developmental stages among individual level as well. At the same time, when the model is examined in detail, it is possible to recognize all interlocked relations of society in terms of a child’s development and it is possible to realize Bronfenbrenner (1979) socio-psychological interpretation as it was mentioned before.

Clearly focusing on the each level of ecological environment of a child and analyzing the interconnected relationships between systems helps to understand the complexity of social relations in a school from an external and broad perspective. This understanding is important to form a school community because every school has a unique structure; the question is how relations could be defined from the inside in order to create the suitable environment for “good relations” between members of the school.

## 2. Schools as Communities

Community is defined as a place where members support and attach importance to each other; where they feel a sense of connectedness, belongingness and identification with the group and where they have common rules, norms, goals and values (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997). As schools could be defined the micro models of society, it can be claimed and argued that schools are communities in terms of their social context (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997). In other words, even if each member has different background, they suppose to respect and care about each other not due to legal obligations but due to social common sense between.

The concept of community has been used to define the psychological components and sides of social settings; and the same concept has been applied to educational settings (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson & Schaps, 1995). According to this perspective, there are two levels -individual and group levels- in terms of being a member in a (school) community. A student has psychological needs about competence, autonomy and belongingness which are also significant for healthy relationships with the other members of a group; in other words it can be plainly explained that students in a school community need to feel that the group is important for them and they are important for the group. Both levels should be taken into consideration in order to carry out a broad and clear evaluation while considering about the schools in this regard (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997). Thus, the significant point is to create a "school community" where students have the feeling of belonging, autonomy, competence and security.

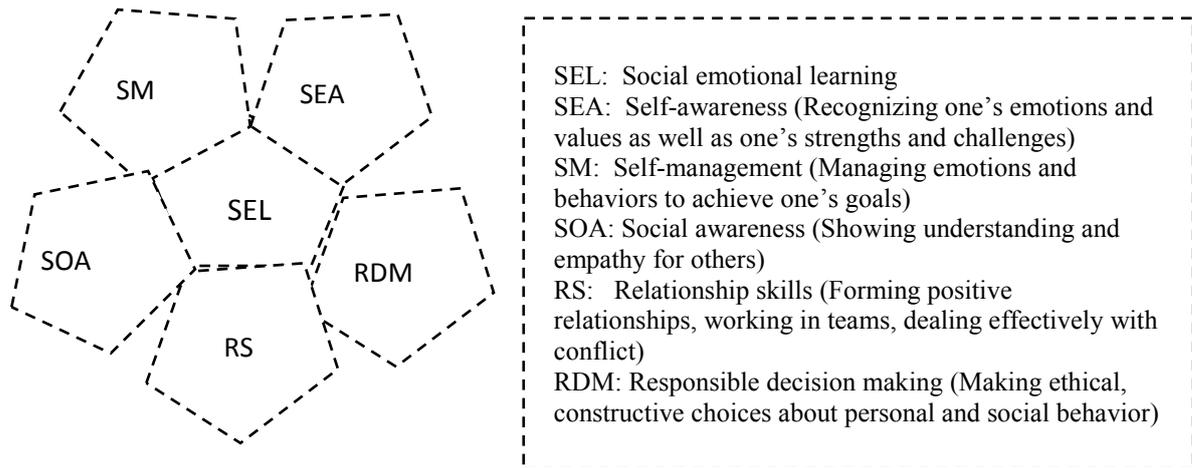
In order to form a consciousness about being part of a community, it is necessary to ensure good social relations between students. Firstly, it is important and essential to improve children's personal, social and emotional skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). Secondly, it is important to provide an environment where all members can feel the sense of belongingness (Osterman, 2000).

## 3. Social-Emotional Learning

Goleman (1995)' book "Emotional Intelligence" is the turning point to the researches in relation between student and emotional competence. Researchers present how teachers form up students' emotions in school settings (Elias et al., 1997). Social and emotional competence are about understanding, managing and expressing the social and emotional life tasks such as forming relationships, self-awareness, social awareness, solving everyday problems, adapting new conditions, behaving responsible and respectful to self and to others (Elias et al., 1997). Social and emotional learning includes life skills to be a member of a group and in general to be a member in the society. It helps in recognizing emotions (oneself and other people's) and acting in an acceptable way in the society (Zins and Elias, 2006). It is possible to see the concepts in social and emotional learning through Figure-2 below. Lopes and Salovey (2004) claimed that there is good evidence that well designed social and emotional learning programs, used

in schools, can enhance students' social and emotional adjustment and related good social relations between them. Social and emotional competencies aren't secondary to the mission of education, but they are concrete factors in the success of teachers, students, and schools (Jones et al., 2013).

### 3. Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies



**Figure 2:** Concepts and competences of Social and Emotional Learning (this five components were mainly formed for a social and emotional learning program but they represent the content of the social and emotional learning, effectively. Figure 2 represents five core social emotional learning skills. Although this figure drawn as pie chart in CASEL web page (Collaboration of academic social emotional learning gets philosophical base from Goleman (1995) study where aim to educate students, teachers and families) as authors of this paper we fell like addition of new competencies.))

Research show that social and emotional education improve students' skills to recognize and manage their emotions, to understand other's perspective and emotions, to handle with interpersonal situations and to make responsible decisions (Greenberg et. al, 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Moreover, according to research, it also develops school connectedness and school engagement which are important concepts for caring self and others in the school context and thus related with the social relations as well (McNeeley, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). In general, literature review about the social and emotional learning applications in different countries and schools shows that social-emotional learning programs significantly improve students' skills, behaviors and attitudes about social behaviors (acceptable social relations and communications) and social emotional competence (recognizing emotions, emotional regulation) (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011).

There are different and important ways to be formed strong schools among social and emotional learning, however it will be mentioned some significant concepts by summarizing the relevant parts of the articles by Ellias et. al. (2003) and Zins et. al.

(2004) which include some arguments about the application of social and emotional learning into schools.

Firstly, social and emotional education should be involved in the curriculum. It is obvious that this application is in macro level (national curriculum is a macrosystem) however teachers should be informed about sensitivity and significance of the subject and they should be encouraged to give importance social-emotional development of children as much as their academic development during classes. Close school (teacher, administrators, school personnel) and parent relationships are also quite important because developmental process continues (actually also starting) at home and parents have an important impact on children's social behaviors, thus teachers, school counselors and school psychologist (also they could consult with school personnel sometimes) should inform parents about their children's social and psychological development. Another point is creating supportive and caring environments; it is quite significant for providing children a secure and safe learning and acting environment for their self and social awareness, self-esteem, and positive sense of self or healthy relationships with others. Enhanced cooperative learning environment is another necessity because learning to work together will probably affect positive social relationships and cope with conflict in a constructive way; without learning collaboration, a child can't learn to make positive relationships. As it was mentioned before, integrating social-emotional learning methods into curriculum is the primary need, however it is also important the supplication of methods into extracurricular activities such as sports or social clubs; in this way, a social learning environment can be built through natural components. Lastly, encouraging students for involvement to the classroom and school activities, caring about their thoughts and letting them to attend the decision processes provide to raise responsible children about their environment which also affect their behaviors and relations with the others in a positive way.

As explained above, social and emotional learning is a necessity for enhanced social relations, not only in schools but also in the society while learning adult roles and communicating with others. Besides this, Baumeister and Leary (1995) claimed that sense of belongingness is important for forming and maintaining positive, lasting interpersonal relationships. These topics are interrelated and support each other, also the underlined solutions are similar; it can be claimed that creating a community requires strong social and emotional education.

According to Schaps, Battistich and Solomon (1997), respectful and supportive relations among students, teachers and parents are one of the key points to create a caring community in schools. The school environment should not be competitive and judgmental because the aim of education is not underlying the weaknesses of children; one of the most significant aims of education is highlighting the strengths of children for a positive personality development. To emphasize on common ideals, goals and feelings supports the sense of group awareness, the sense of belongingness and connectedly good social relations with others. School involvement is another key concept as mentioned before, because involvement bring along the feeling of

responsibility, participation to decisions in school could improve the sense of belongingness and caring both for oneself and for the others in the community.

#### **4. SEL Territorial Studies**

Because of Goleman (1995; 2006) studies conducted in U.S. extensive research conducted in this country. Collaboration academics of social emotional learning is known CASEL distinguished organization for diffuse theory and application of SEL in educational settings also in U.S. (Elias & Mocerri, 2012). Research conducted in European countries mainly focused on pre-education and elementary education involve projects and their usability (Dracinschi, 2012).

There is an experience from a school in Germany, where these two points (social emotional learning and creating a sense of belongingness) were taken into account about creating a school community (1988); the source of this experience is a transcription of an interview with a school principle in Germany. She stresses the significance of being a school community by the sense of belongingness and participation of all members to the school in every level for accomplishment. While she was explaining the creation of school community; firstly, she mentioned about the teams by six to eight teachers who were responsible for a group of students. The important point, she highlighted, was teachers not only taking care of students' academic achievement, but also their counseling about some issues which could impact students' personal development such as family problems, friend relationships or personal problems by supporting them about social activities, talking with parents, helping them to broaden their interests. Besides, she pointed out that people need time for a healthy and bonded relationships, thus they paid strict attention not to change teachers and the students in the groups. Teachers' participation to decisions was another significant point according to her; because autonomy brings responsibility and the feeling of belongingness which are indispensable elements of a community; in fact all members should participate the school administration process from different points to feel bonded. Supporting and encouraging every child without any success expectation was another key to hold all class, even all school together. Otherwise, the competition feeling with others could ruin the environment of confidence and accordingly the feeling of being a "community" (Ratzki, 1988).

With those points in the German experience, there are some findings which explain the question of how the sense of belongingness of members can positively affect the social relations in a school; research suggests that in communally organized schools, staff morale is higher, teacher absenteeism is lower and teachers are more satisfied with their work (Byrk and Driscoll, 1988); and accordingly all those, it can be claimed that more satisfaction provides a strong sense of community and as Royal and Rossi (1997) stated a sense of community among staff members may also an important precursor for the development of sense of community among students (also could be explained through Bandura's and Vygotsky's social learning theories). Besides, communally organized schools have fewer problems about student misbehaviors for instance

absenteeism or cut a class (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988); more relevantly to the topic, findings from a research illustrated that students' sense of community is positively related to their engagement in school activities and related to their positive social relations with others, this constructive process prepare students for full participation in a democratic society (Royal & Rossi, 1997).

## **5. The Balance Point: Educational Psychologists**

The role of schools about to enhance students' social development is a complicated subject because schools are open systems and they constantly interact with their environments (Lunenburg, 2010) which also explain the effect of macro, exo and meso systems according to ecological theory. From this point of view and it was mentioned in the first part, schools are micro models of society. Although this awareness is meaningful to a broad evaluation, the highlighted point in the second part, the schools as communities, can be a starting point to support the social development of children's in schools.

It was tried to argue about how it could be provided to enhance good social relations between students in the previous parts of essay; however that was a general argument about the role of schools; when we consider about the school personnel, it is worth mentioning specifically about their roles to ensure a backdrop for good social relations between students.

Beyond any doubt, the role of school administrator is quite significant but they also have the position of directing the whole school and they are not always the one who directly communicate with students; teachers should follow the curriculum and this success-oriented education system in the world in general can hinder the given importance to students' social development; however it can be claimed that responsibilities of a school counselor could match up with the social development of children from every points. Because they are not only a direct service providers to students, also they must work with the adults in schools such as parents, teachers and administrators (Bradley-Johnson & Dean, 2000), thus moreover it can be claimed that they are the balance point to equalize the social development of children in schools.

Even school administrators, teachers and parents have to care about all development stages of children; administrators have responsibilities out of care about children's education or teachers have to prepare their students to exams and they have to follow curriculum or some parents do not have the knowledge of child psychology and development, however educational psychologists are responsible about the compatible development of students in every fields and especially they should not have stereotypes by their profession and they can communicate and balanced the situations with the other adults in schools to support children's social relations. Their job definition involves to support staff development and to give in-service training, in other words consulting teachers and other school personnel is a part of their profession (Fagan & Wise, 1994) as well as consulting parents.

Changing world, changing needs, clarified multicultural structure of countries are required social justice awareness among staff in schools. Redefined role of educational psychologists also involves culturally competent, social justice advocating (Bemark and Chung, 2008). As they can be defined the balance point of schools, children's social development should be considered by them. They are not only capable of understanding a child's needs but also they have the knowledge of generating good relationships between all adults in the school and educational context, which is a necessity to create a positive and healthy school community for children's social development and for making good relations with each other.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

School is not ordinary building which consists of wall, window, door etc. As mentioned in Bronfenbrenner (1979) theory as a working system, the chief units of the school are students and teachers. Setting up understanding chronosystem to mesosystem leads to cooperative transition to exosystem to macrosystem. With this school mission, children will be better arranged between systems.

Students with their peers continually are interrelated with each other. In classroom, laboratory, canteen and playgrounds, students have to use their effective lively time with their friends. Without any discrimination in our enlarging multicultural population, schools should gain some skills that make students relate with each other socially. With the works of Goleman (1995; 2006) studies mainly in U.S. social emotional learning seems to be valuable combination of application that help students' communication, relation, interaction. This is the founding of related research. With diverse population of word studies related to social emotional learning seem to not be enough only in U.S. and some European countries' samples. We need applications conducted in heat points of world.

With the collaboration of key figure school psychologist' with teachers, parents, counselors and other school bodies students will develop their potential for social relations with others. But the question is that how much the school professionals are aware of this notion. McKewitt (2012) found that school psychologists have limited awareness of the majority of published, evidence-based SEL programs. We recommend that for the students' relations with each other and the others for the peaceful school climate and more academic success, SEL gives chance to reach these opportunities. SEL studies should be more common around the world for meaningful student relation.

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