Addressing the Social-Emotional Needs of Adult Learners to Ensure Workplace Success: Combined Practices That Integrate Social Emotional Learning and Employability Skills

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Abstract: Research on social emotional learning (SEL) and employability skills has shown positive outcomes for learners over the past three decades. They both represent skills and competencies that are important for adult learners in gaining workplace success. However, rather than focusing on each set of competencies separately in instruction, adult educators could benefit from understanding how SEL and employability skills can be combined. This paper focuses on defining both SEL and employability skills, identifying where the skills overlap as combined instructional practices, and discussing implications for adult education classrooms.

Keywords: social emotional learning, adult education, employability, work readiness

How can we prepare adult learners to not only get a job but also be successful on the job? Research suggests that employment success requires considerably more than just academic knowledge. Workers need skills and competencies for analyzing tasks, solving problems, managing themselves, and interacting with others on the job. These skills and competencies span two key constructs—social emotional learning (SEL) and employability skills—both of which have been shown to positively relate to adult learners' outcomes.

Fortunately, there are commonalities in these skill sets. This paper focuses on the intersection of SEL and employability skills and describes how they can be integrated to strengthen adults' preparation for and success in the workplace. It starts by defining SEL and employability skills and describing the research base for each concept. It then presents an integrated framework for addressing areas of overlap between SEL and employability skills and discusses implications for adult education classrooms.

SEL and Employability Skills

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2020), SEL is the "process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (para. 2). SEL centers on five competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In 1994, Daniel Goldman, an emotional intelligence researcher known for his 1995 New York Times best-selling *Emotional Intelligence*, co-founded CASEL. CASEL's charge was to integrate emotional with social learning to create an evidence base in response to youth development needs in schools. For the next two decades, CASEL and

collaborators advanced the research in SEL, culminating in the 2015 *Handbook of Social Emotional Learning Research and Practice* published by Guilford Press (Durlak et al., 2015).

Research on the effect of SEL in the K–12 environment can be applied to both adult education and employment contexts. Several research reviews and meta-analyses on SEL show student gains in achievement scores and in areas like improved social skills, attitudes, behavior, and overall well-being (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). When applied to employment, SEL skills have been linked to problem-solving and self-regulation (a "critical thinking disposition," Arslan & Demitras, 2016) and employment skills, information development, and competence ("lifelong learning," Akcaalan, 2016). On the job, SEL has been related to increased job satisfaction and decreased stress among employed teachers (Collie et al., 2015).

The 1990s also saw an increased focus on defining employability skills—the general skills needed for workplace success. In 1990, the U.S. Department of Labor convened the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), which identified a set of work-readiness skills to better prepare individuals for employment and to meet employers' increasing needs for qualified workers (1991). Likewise, numerous employer surveys have documented the labor market need for employability skills and suggest that employers often prioritize these general skills over academic or technical knowledge (Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). These findings extend to international labor markets as well. For example, an early investigation of skills demands among 25 of the largest employers in Canada identified three categories of skills: (a) communication, critical thinking, and lifelong learning; (b) positive attitudes and behaviors, responsibilities, and adaptability; and (c) teamwork (McLaughlin, 1995). More recently, Sarfraz et al. (2018) published a global, systematic research review of 43 studies across 17 countries, naming four skills categories: interpersonal and communication skills, relationship management skills, cognitive and problem-solving skills, and productive self-management.

Recognizing commonalities across different sets of employability skills, in 2012, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (n.d.) funded RTI International to conduct a scan of existing employability skills and develop a common framework for organizing the skills. The resulting product, the employability skills framework, categorized employability skills into nine sets of skills in three groups (see Table 1). This framework illustrates how the different sets of employability skills intersect and offers terminology for discussing employability skills across education and workforce systems.

Employability skills are recognized in federal legislation as a critical component of college and career readiness. For example, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) lists employability skills in its definition of workforce preparation activities. The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (2018) references employability skills in its purpose, describing the role career and technical education programs play in developing students' academic, technical, and employability skills. Likewise, SEL has gained notice in legislative activity. In 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a 2020 congressional funding bill to include $260 million for SEL research and practice in schools (H.R. 2740, 2020). In September 2020, the U.S. Senate introduced a resolution to support evidence-based SEL programs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (S. Resolution 691, 2020).

Table 1. *Employability Skills Framework's Skills and Groupings*

Group 1 Applied Knowledge	Group 2 Effective Relationships	Group 3 Workplace Skills
• Applied academic skills • Critical thinking skills	• Interpersonal skills • Personal qualities	• Resource management • Information use • Communication skills • Systems thinking • Technology use

SEL and Employability Skills Integration

At first glance, there are obvious connections between CASEL's five core SEL competencies and the skills identified in the Employability Skills Framework. These connections mostly address inter- and intrapersonal abilities, such as being able to effectively manage one's schedule to arrive at work on time and to appropriately interact with coworkers and supervisors. This overlap indicates that there are common factors for building social-emotional competency and being successful at work. What the overlap does not tell us, however, is how to integrate these constructs into a coherent framework for teaching.

Therefore, we have combined SEL competencies and employability skills to provide guidance for adult educators. Figure 1 shows the five SEL competencies on the left and related employability skills on the right. The middle column presents the overlapping practice that connects each SEL competency to a related employability skill. Each integrated practice provides instructors with a streamlined approach to incorporating SEL and employability skills in the classroom, as further described below.

Show a Growth Mindset for Self-Confidence

A growth mindset (Dweck, 2007) embraces challenges, persists in the face of setbacks, sees effort as a path to mastery, learns from criticism, and finds lessons and inspiration in the success of others. For example, an adult learner with a growth mindset will confidently embrace the challenge of having to use fractions to complete a work task even though they may have struggled with learning fractions in high school.

Take Initiative Then Manage With Self-Discipline

Accomplishing goals requires initiative to set the goal and begin working toward it and self-management to monitor progress and persist across multiple tasks. For example, if an adult learner sets a goal to get a job, they will then need to take the initiative to look for jobs. Once they find a job of interest, then they will plan, implement, and monitor steps toward getting that job, such as revising their resume, writing a cover letter, and applying by the position deadline.

Figure 1. *SEL Competencies, Related Employability Skills, and Combined Practices*
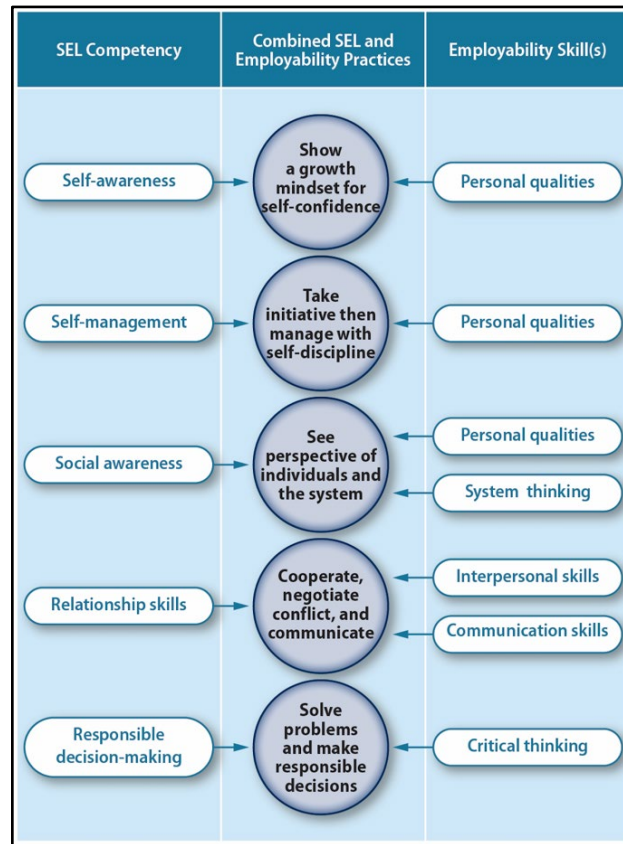
See Perspective of Individuals and the System

Understanding the perspectives of others can be challenging, especially in getting outside of our own perspectives, but the ability to do so can help with conflict resolution and improving communication. Taking the perspective of a *system* is imagining the viewpoint of *agencies* or *organizations*. Agencies are not people, but they have norms and rules that need to be followed. For example, adult learners may interact with many organizations, services, and resources along their chosen career pathways and need to understand the perspectives these systems offer to effectively navigate the pathway. A road map (see Figure 2) is one strategy for illustrating key decision points and perspectives along the pathway.

Figure 2. Systems Perspective Taking with a Road Map

The Data Quality Campaign (n.d.) provides an illustration of a road map, called Grace's Path to Success. In this example, Grace wants to be a nurse. After high school, she faces four potential next steps: enroll in basic training, enroll in a 4-year nursing program, work as a nursing assistant, or enroll in a 2-year college. Using the road map, Grace (and other adult learners) can visualize the community supports and various paths toward a goal. The road map visual can be adjusted for other goals, whether job, education, or citizenship related.

Cooperate, Negotiate Conflict, and Communicate

Getting along with coworkers, supervisors, and clients requires clear communication skills and the ability to productively deal with and resolve conflict. An individual cannot do so without the appropriate social or emotional skills. For example, an employee may be asked by their manager to make a sales call to a client, but maybe the employee feels uncomfortable with this client. Or the employee's boss wants them to work overtime the next day, but they had planned to attend their daughter's softball game. In either case, the employee will need to communicate with their boss about how to talk with the client or to negotiate the personal time off.

Solve Problems and Make Responsible Decisions

The ability to think critically about a goal involves problem-solving and decision-making. For example, if an adult learner is deciding between becoming a licensed practical nurse or a certified nursing assistant, they will need to think critically about each option by weighing the pros and cons and understanding the requirements of either path. By considering all options, they can be confident that they have made a responsible decision.

Implications for Practice in Adult Education

How can adult educators use these overlapping concepts to improve practice? The following suggestions can help educators deepen their understanding of SEL and employability skills, both as individual constructs and as an integrated concept.

Become Familiar With SEL Resources for Application in the Adult Education Context

CASEL has recently developed several resources to support SEL instruction. These include the following:
- the District Resource Center (https://drc.casel.org) with curated resources for school systems that can also assist adult educators in SEL implementation;
- an assessment guide for K–12 teachers (https://measuringsel.casel.org) to understand and use SEL measures; and
- the CASEL CARES Initiative (https://casel.org/weekly-webinars/), a weekly webinar series to respond to the current crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the exacerbation of both economic and racial inequities, including the webinar published in August 2020, *Cultivating Adult SEL in Unprecedented Times.*

Become Familiar With Resources to Support the Employability Skills Framework

Employability skills can be integrated into instructional programs at all levels and in different contexts. In September 2020, the U.S. Department of Education released new resources to support employability skills instruction and assessment. Housed on LINCS (https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/employability-skills-framework), these resources include tools for aligning instructional programs to the employability skills framework, for selecting an assessment to measure employability skills, and for preparing learners to display their employability skills in employment interviews.

Incorporate Integrated Practices With Regular Classroom Content

We described the five combined practices above in the work-readiness context. But these practices can also be applied in other adult education content areas and domains, such as literacy, math, citizenship, and English language instruction. For example, instructors can use a goal-setting strategy for the practice, *take initiative and manage with self-discipline,* by providing a graphic organizer with four boxes: task to complete, strategies to use, timeline and steps, and reflection. If a learner's task is to read a text section about the executive branch of government, then the instructor can introduce the graphic organizer to help the learner plan how to approach the text. When the assignment is complete, the instructor can work with the learner to complete the reflection box to describe what strategies they used and steps they took to understand the content.

Summary

Adult educators prepare learners to be successful in their employment paths. Research over the past 30 years describes the social emotional learning competencies and employability skills needed to support workplace preparation and success. Adult educators who understand and incorporate a combination of practices reflecting this research could enhance learner success with employment and beyond.

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