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Zdravka is not only an English teacher but also an edu-enthusiast. She believes that working in a small rural school requires enthusiasm and perseverance to teach great things with little resources. She is an author and co-author of several published lesson examples in the Proceedings of Good Practice, where she showcased her pedagogical ideas. She was the finalist of the first Science on Stage Serbia festival, where she merged language and science. She is very digital competent and curates an online blog English corner, where she scaffolds students to learn English with fun. She is also a co-author of the website "Let's share knowledge" and the seminar "With a little effort to STEAM skills".

SEL and why it matters to students

Do you remember playing hopscotch or hide-and-seek when you were a child? People who were born in the previous century used to spend hours playing outside when they were children. My granny told me she used to be forced to kneel on corn when she was a student. Although our teachers weren't so strict, our education wasn't filled with vivid, happy memories. I still remember our geography teacher's stick, with which he would punish us in front of a map, if we missed a mountain or a river in the middle of nowhere... We had a happy childhood. We didn't know anything about the global economy or world crises, but when we grew up, we weren't ready for real life. We used to adopt new knowledge without asking too many questions because we just knew it was obligatory to know all the dates of the battles in the two World Wars.

The educational system was designed to develop the skills needed on factory floors. In the meantime, the society got redefined, and it is high time education accepted that and transformed itself accordingly. Today, in the classrooms, we develop more empathy for others within the community and it helps students to be better, more productive and self-aware.

A few years ago, the world was a hive of activity, crowded and busy, but then the pandemic started and everything stopped. It was so unexpected that most of us didn't manage to function normally at first. The whole planet was brought to a halt. For a while, there were no traffic jams, planes were grounded, schools were closed and most people were desperate and locked in their houses. After a prolonged school lockdown had disrupted children's routines, including normal school days, it also blocked their access to the basic forms of support that schools provide and, of course, face-to-face contact with teachers and friends that is fundamental to child development. Although many teachers dispute the spread of technology, during the pandemic it has been the only way of communicating with students and other colleagues. Social networking allowed all users in the educational system to join in and rally around causes. For example, in the school where I work, a Serbian teacher directed and staged a school play on-line. She was communicating with students on Facebook, and they all took part in it. The play was great, and for students it was really important to stay in touch with their friends and teachers. When the lockdown was over, we all summed up the consequences that were obvious at first sight. We saw that empathy, resilience, and the ability to cope with anxiety turned out to have a major impact on children's daily lives, and must be focused on just like school subjects including maths, history, science, social sciences, or foreign languages. Teachers around the globe incorporated social and emotional skills into their educational practice and by combining them with lifelong learning not only succeeded in surviving the pandemic, but also improved student academic performance.

How can we incorporate SEL into the curriculum?

There are many definitions of SEL resembling one another, but all of them include humanity, positive energy and support, and lifelong learning, which is the basis of the whole curriculum.

SEL is everywhere around us, when students help each other or engage in different activities together, when teachers show compassion and try to understand student needs.

There is no need for grand gestures, it is enough to accept that everyone's growth looks different, and to let them grow! We dispute the spread of technology and keep saying that children spend too much time in front of different screens instead of joining them in making learning an endless game. Let's use phones and computers as part of the learning process, let's make learning interesting to 21st century students. Why don't we join them in the learning process? Instead of teaching them numerous facts, figures and data, we should teach them how to use them, how to adapt them to their future needs, because they will change professions many times in their lives. Besides, being a teacher means having a profession that helps build all others. Students need our help not simply to become successful, but to accept failures as a step forward on their way to success. Our job is not only to teach them algebra, history, geography or languages, but also to encourage them to continually make progress, no matter how slow, and to be role models to our students as far as the quest for lifelong learning is concerned.

What are the benefits of SEL for students?

“Research proves that social-emotional learning has positive, lasting effects for K-12 students, including improved academic achievement, reduced conduct problems, lower emotional distress, and higher rates of graduation.”

—Tia Kim, Ph.D., Vice President of Education, Research & Impact Committee for Children

What are the five components of social-emotional learning?

CASEL lists **five core social emotional learning competencies**:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

How can an average teacher include SEL into his or her classes?

First and foremost, you need to think out of the box, and not be afraid of disappointment. You need to be strong enough to help others even if you are struggling with your own paperwork problems. Teachers must also use their own social-emotional skills to establish high-quality relationships with students (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013).

During the pandemic we all have grown closer to our students by maintaining regular contact; we used all the available means of communication in order to help them master educational content. Moreover, both teachers and students had to further develop their digital skills which they had before the pandemic and it resulted in more innovative classes in real life. Digital competencies are very important for SEL and STE(A)M education, because they are based on using digital technologies. A few years before the pandemic had started, I found my teaching to have been rather old fashioned and began introducing new methods. I started publishing lessons on my blog, set up a Google classroom for my students and shared additional materials in it. I started exploring a wide range of tools available on the

Internet, which proved to be very useful when creating different class materials. Students were very pleased because they could combine studying and playing games.

When we moved back from virtual to real classroom, we were already keen on using games in English classes. Students enjoyed using phones, the interactive board and other digital content so much that they started creating educational software with my help. In the beginning only a small group of students were willing to participate in order to help their classmates learn lessons more easily. Soon other students were encouraged by their friends to contribute and now all my students take part in creating lesson plans and activities. They are all more interested in learning and cooperating even when someone is in isolation, because technology allows us to connect with each other.

SEL provides many benefits for students, but for me personally, the most important thing is being part of a group, feeling that you belong to a team, and that together we can make it. One of the projects I am very proud of is *Tree of Wishes* conceived by my students. At first, we had an idea to make an interactive season's greetings card for those children who were isolated because of COVID-19. But when we started making the interactive card, we shared it with the students in isolation, and they all took part in creating the 2022 *Tree of Wishes*. Instead of shiny ball-shaped decorations, the card featured a Christmas tree that had the names of students on its branches, and when you opened the card, the picture with season's greetings was shown. We shared this interactive Christmas card with parents and other teachers. Students were very proud of their teamwork, knowing they created it together using their own skills. Simple activities like this one improve their self-confidence very much. There is a wide range of SEL activities at your disposal, think and act out of the box, be creative and enjoy your classes as much as your students do. Implementing digital tools and SEL provide numerous opportunities for adapting classes to the needs of all students. It is important to accept that students and teachers alike have their own individual needs and requirements that have to be met for growth to occur. Instead of creating barriers, bring teachers and students together!