THE FLOURISH *lab*

Exploring the *Research*

Contents

Social Emotional Learning for Young People

Over the last decade social emotional learning (SEL) has garnered increased attention not just for its role in building "soft skills" that need to be developed alongside a young person's academic education, but as "the substance of education itself" (Aspen Institute, 2019). Public awareness of, media attention on, and policy related to SEL are on a growth trajectory (Grant & Gilbert, 2018). A mounting body of research on the power of social emotional learning shows the benefits of SEL for students. Building SEL skills in young people helps foster consistently positive outcomes including higher achievement on standardized tests (Durlak et al., 2011); improved high school graduation rates, college and career readiness, and stable employment (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2015); better mental health and relationships (Greenberg et.al., 2017); and reduced risky behavior (Durlak et al., 2011).

Increasingly, we are also discovering more than we ever have before about the science of learning and development and how the brain acquires knowledge, skills, and competencies. One of the defining learnings is that context matters. "Experiences, environments, and cultures are the defining influences on development. Nothing happens to the developing brain and body that does not happen in context" (SoLD Alliance, 2021). With the importance of context, we must attend to how learning environments can be intentionally designed to support positive development (Cantor et al., 2021). Any approach to supporting SEL must look not only at explicit SEL instruction, but also at the purposeful creation of environments and experiences that are most conducive to SEL.

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The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's (SEAD Commission) *Practice Base for How Learning Happens* (2019) reinforces what has long been seen as the theory of change in youth development – as outlined in the Forum for Youth Investment's David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality's (Weikart Center) QuEST model (2014). High-quality positive youth development and SEL programs begin with the creation of positive learning settings, which lead to development experiences grounded in relationships and ultimately to attainment of skills and desired outcomes that are transferable beyond the program itself (Aspen Institute, 2019; Smith & McGovern, 2014). The Science of Learning & Development Alliance's (SoLD Alliance) guiding principles for equitable whole-child design also emphasize the necessity not just of starting with relationships and belonging, but of keeping them in balance with all other aspects of learning experiences (Cantor et.al., 2021). Further, focusing not just on the what of SEL, but the how and the why (via a focus on context and a systemic approach to implementation) helps avoid the use of SEL as a tool to "fix kids", a lens which creates particular risk for students who are currently underserved in the education system (Duchesneau, 2020).

Achieving positive outcomes for young people begins with creating optimized learning environments, but also includes adults' efforts to model and imbed social emotional skills throughout engaging learning experiences. Adults working with young people need to recognize that explicit teaching of SEL skills is a powerful, but insufficient, way to boost competencies. Rather, skills-teaching needs to be supported across contexts through a balance of supportive (or positive) climates and integration of SEL skills into other content delivery (Elias et al., 2015). An intentional focus on SEL, particularly in the out-of-school time programs, necessitates building upon positive youth development approaches with increased intentionality of SEL skill development through a focus on how "competencies are both *caught* and *taught*" (Blythe, 2018).

Findings from the Weikart Center and Susan Crown Exchanges' SEL Demonstration Initiative and early findings from the Wallace Foundation's Partnership for Social Emotional Learning both indicate that in order to shape learning environments or explicitly teach SEL skills – in both school and out-of-school time settings – the development of adult SEL skills is foundational to the development of student SEL skills (Plog Martinez et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2020). While SEL curriculum and programs geared toward students are readily available, there are far fewer programs aimed at supporting adults in focusing on their own social-emotional competencies and building the skills necessary to support social emotional learning through the creation of SEL rich environments and infusion of SEL into all instruction. Specifically, the SEAD Commission calls for a redesign of educator preparation programs to ensure a

focus on human development, the science of learning and development, and the integration of SEL (Aspen Institute, 2019). While youth development training received by most out-of-school time professionals already touches on these elements, there have been parallel calls for greater intentionality and focus on SEL in both professional learning and ongoing continuous improvement for out-of-school time program staff (Bednar et al., 2018; Plog Martinez et al., 2018). The Flourish Lab seeks to help fill this gap and provide a means by which youth development professionals can access high-quality professional learning to help them shape positive learning environments and experiences for young people in out-of-school-time programs and beyond.

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Addressing Needs of Out-of-School Time Programs

Content for the Flourish Lab has been in development for eight years and capitalizes on the authors' collective three decades experience working directly with young people, supervising adults working with young people, observing out-of-school-time programs, and providing professional learning to thousands of youth-serving professionals. Most recently, The Flourish Lab was utilized as part of Denver Public Schools and the Denver Afterschool Alliance's engagement in the Wallace Foundation's Partnership for Social Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). Early findings from the PSELI initiative include critical considerations for professional learning design:

- High rates of staff turnover in out-of-school time programs necessitate supports that consistently ensure all staff have a foundational understanding of SEL. This can include professional learning that leverages both longer and shorter sessions on specific SEL topics;
- Professional learning needs to progress and differentiate as staff engage more deeply in the work and to provide opportunities for hands-on practice; and
- Centralized delivery of professional learning allows for greater consistency of learning across program locations (Schwartz et.al., 2020).

> The Flourish Lab's online format also actively addresses inequities in access to training. Early lessons from COVID-19 shed light on the ways online delivery can improve equity of access to learning and overcome barriers to training.

By design, The Flourish Lab addresses not only these considerations, but also other common challenges faced by out-of-school time programs. The Flourish Lab's online, on-demand modules provide a consistent tool that allows programs to consistently onboard new staff, as necessitated by high rates of turnover. Even so, the Flourish Lab aims to minimize rather than just responding to turnover rates. High quality professional learning – such as that provided via The Flourish Lab – has been found to improve staff retention in out-of-school time programs (Huang & Cho, 2010). The Flourish Lab's online format also actively addresses inequities in access to training. Early lessons from COVID-19 shed light on the ways online delivery can improve equity of access to learning and overcome barriers to training including balancing work and family responsibilities, transportation, and financial constraints (OECD, 2020) – challenges that are often faced by out-of-school time program staff.

Approach to Adult Learning & The Flourish Lab Design

The Flourish Lab's approach to adult learning relies deeply on the principles of andragogy and their application to online learning. Malcolm Knowles was among the first to popularize the use of the term andragogy with his emphasis on the unique needs adult learners have needs distinct from those of children and youth. He presents five assumptions about adult learners. They have:

1. strong self-concept and are more self-directed learners;
2. experience and existing knowledge they seek to connect to their learning;
3. greater readiness to learn;
4. a problem-centered orientation to learning and a desire to apply learning immediately; and
5. an intrinsic motivation to learn (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, 1984).

From this four principles of andragogy emerge. Adult learners need:

1. to be engaged in planning and evaluating their learning;
2. learning grounded in their experiences;
3. subjects that have immediate relevance; and
4. problem, rather than content, centered learning (Knowles, 1984).

Over the last two decades with the emergence of e-learning, research and practice publications outline how these assumptions and principles apply to online professional learning opportunities. Andragogy is attended to through creating just-in-time learning opportunities; allowing freedom to navigate courses; including inquiry-based learning, real life scenarios, and guidance to connect to lived experiences; allowing active participation and interaction with other learners; providing opportunities for and direction on application and transferability of learning; incorporating gamification to increase motivation and sense of control; and providing quick and responsive feedback to learners (Bloody, 2007; Chametzky, 2014; educated, 2020; Frey & Webreck, 2003; Lambda Solutions, 2020; Pandey, 2017).

In alignment with the early RAND findings on professional learning, and grounded in andragogy, The Flourish Lab is designed to maximize engagement of adult learners. The Flourish Lab, available in English and Spanish, ensures ongoing, consistent access to materials to quickly connect with out-of-school time professionals and engage them in SEL. All Flourish Lab modules can be completed individually or in a cohort model. The Flourish Lab's Ignite, Explore, and Deepen model allow for differentiated progression based on an individual, program, or organization's content and time needs:

- A 75-minute **Ignite** module provides the foundation and introduction to SEL and adults' role in supporting it
- 3, 75-minute **Explore** modules introduce and allow for initial practice in three focus areas – Relationships, Planning and Presence
- 20 to 30-minute **Deepen** modules allow for more targeted learning on specific aspects of each of the focus areas

As suggested by research, the flexibility of the modules, coupled with ability to work individually or in groups, provides opportunities for adult learners to plan their experience and engagement. Modules are framed around current issues in out-of-school time programming and include real-life scenarios and stories from professionals in the field, guidance for immediate application, and connection to individual contexts allowing participants to both bring in their past experiences and identify opportunities for immediate application in their programs. Participants will also experience regular opportunities for interactions with others engaging in The Flourish Lab and will receive prompt feedback on all demonstrations of learning.

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The Flourish Lab Focus Areas

Relationships

Decades of research emphasizes the positive power of relationships. The Search Institute's research on Developmental Relationships has shown that youth with more strong developmental relationships are more motivated in school, demonstrate more personal responsibility, have higher social-emotional competence, and are less likely to engage in risky behavior (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017; Search Institute, 2020). Even one strong relationship has been shown to help young people avoid developmental disruption and build resilience (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015) and supportive relationships are critical to providing young people with experiences that buffer against the impact of adverse childhood experiences[1] (Houltberg, 2020). The Science of Learning and Development Alliance further finds that as social beings, relationships are essential to learning and development (2020).

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Yet one in five young people report they have no strong relationships in their lives (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017). Recent research from the Search Institute indicates that young people in out-of-school time programs report more strong relationships than in other youth serving settings (2020), indicating the power out-of-school time providers hold to be a positive and powerful influence in young people's lives.

The Relationship Explore and Deepen modules will provide an overview of the importance of relationships, help participants understand their current relationships, and foster skills for using trauma-informed approaches to build and maintain strong, supportive relationships with colleagues and young people.

Planning

The SEAD Commission emphasizes the need for the transformation of learning settings, with a focus on building environments where all young people feel supported and SEL is embedded in academics and schoolwide practices (2018). The SoLD Alliance makes clear that "intentional,

well-designed, developmental contexts" are necessary for young people to succeed (2020). To accomplish this transformational work, intentional planning and preparation are necessary. The SEL Challenge, a partnership between The Weikart Center, the Susan Crown Exchange, and eight exemplary out-of-school time programs identified 26 concrete staff practices (behaviors and structures) that proved most impactful in developing specific skills, and a range of overarching practices (called curriculum features) that helped shape an organization's SEL work. Developing program and SEL sequence, safe spaces (for young people and staff), responsive practices, and supports for staff also proved necessary for success (Smith et al., 2016).

The Planning Explore and Deepen modules will provide both an overview of the importance of planning (individually and organizationally) for creating SEL environments and SEL instruction and also hands-on, practical tools and strategies to support planning for and alongside young people.

Presence

Emotional intelligence is linked to workplace success, positive relationships, and overall well-being (Freedman & Fariselli, 2016) and is a greater predictor of performance than IQ (Mount, 2006). This holds true in the education field where teachers' own social emotional competencies are connected to stronger relationships and more effective SEL implementation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

[1] The Centers for Disease Control Defines adverse childhood experiences as potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years).

Much as leaders with high IQ are better able to connect with purpose and vision and effectively communicate it (Martinez, 2017), for youth development professionals, their own emotional intelligence is critical to providing the level of needed sensitivity to empathize with young people, understand their actions, and effectively build relationships (Youth Work Practice, 2021). How youth-serving adults show up in their work directly shapes interactions with young people and quality of programming. Ultimately, how adults show up impacts whether youth are able to fully engage and express themselves (Assets for Colorado Youth, 2006). With the tumult of COVID-19, young people and their families are looking more to out-of-school time staff than they ever have before for emotional support (Learning Heroes, 2021). Responding with compassion and emotional intelligence is necessary. While adults have commonly been taught that bringing emotions to work is detrimental, reflecting emotions in a productive manner allows adults to bring their full selves to their work with young people (Solomon, 2020).

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>
> (Youth Work Practice, 2021)

The Presence Explore and Deepen modules help adults focus more deeply on how their own social emotional competencies and emotional intelligence strengthen their presence and ability to foster positive outcomes in young people. These modules will support participants in understanding their impact and building their own self-awareness and emotional intelligence to show up each day prepared to support young people.

Conclusion

The Flourish Lab is grounded in youth development and SEL research as well as online andragogy best practices outlined in this review and designed based on on-the-ground implementation with hundreds of out-of-school-time professionals. The Flourish Lab aims to build adults' own emotional intelligence and support skill development that will equip out-of-school time professionals to build relationships with and create SEL rich environments and experiences for young people.
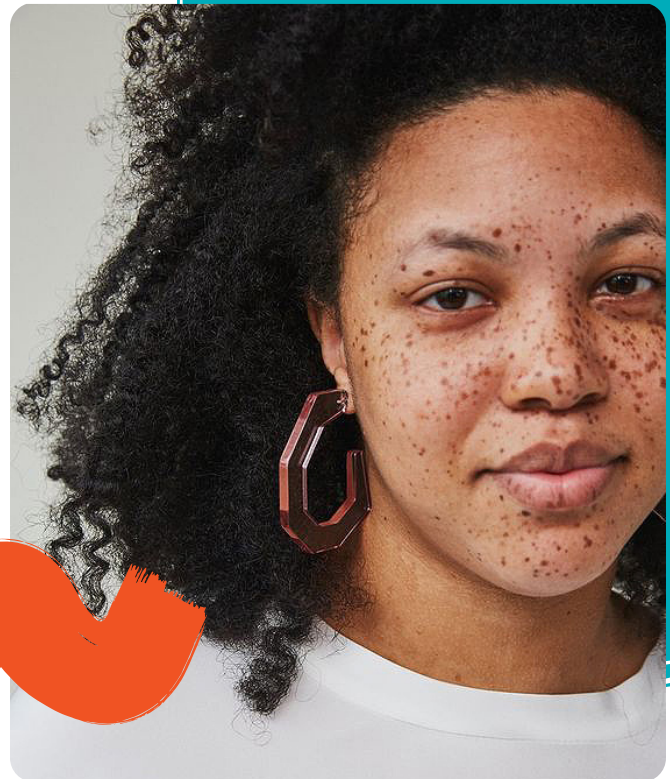
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