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## Teachers Weave Social-Emotional Learning Into Academics



Students Parker Davis and Alina Lopez, right, talk about words and acts that cause happiness during morning circle time in teacher Susannah Young's 2nd grade class at Lincoln Elementary School in Oakland, Calif. Young focuses on developing students' writing skills and interpersonal skills by fostering peer-to-peer conversations, part of a larger effort to infuse social-emotional learning in the classroom.

—Ramin Rahimian for Education Week

By Evie Blad

May 5, 2017

Oakland, Calif.

In Susannah Young's 2nd grade classroom, the first step in a student's writing process isn't a rough draft; it's a conversation with a peer.

Students explain their ideas to a partner, respond to questions, and push each other to more fully explore their thoughts before they put them down on paper.

Young, who teaches at Oakland's Lincoln Elementary School, developed the approach through a unusual professional development experience designed to help a cohort of Oakland teachers integrate social-emotional learning strategies into their teaching of traditional academic subjects, like reading and math. In sessions led by faculty from Mills College, a liberal arts school in Oakland, the **Mills teacher scholars** each select one instructional practice as a focus area, spending at least a year improving it through guided inquiry work.

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Inquiry is basically a structured, reflective conversation through which listeners help guide their peers and challenge their thinking. Teachers in the cohort meet weekly with their school peers and monthly as a large group for open-ended, reflective conversations and to review student work and videos of children interacting in their classrooms.

They pay close attention to how students' emotions and peer interactions affect their learning. For example, one teacher focused on helping students have productive conversations about math problems, developing strategies to help them talk through disagreements about how to find a solution, and how to explain their reasoning.

"I really feel like the most powerful part of it is that it's starting with what's happening in your classroom," Young said. "Not what's supposed to be happening, not what the curriculum thinks should be happening. What's actually happening."

### Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning involves **nurturing students' interpersonal and behavioral skills through a variety of educational strategies**. Around the country, more schools are experimenting with social-emotional learning, buoyed by research that correlates it with positive outcomes, like academic gains and reduced disciplinary incidents. Employers have also pointed to so-called "soft skills" as desirable traits for future employees.

Young's inquiry work, which focused on classroom writing workshops, led her to bring more peer interactions into the writing process as a way of separating the act of conceptualizing an essay from the work of writing it out. She got the idea after she interviewed students about the purpose of the workshops and got answers revealing some students' misunderstanding of why writing matters. "We do writing workshops to help improve our handwriting," one boy told her.

"The purpose of writing was not clear to him," Young said. "That really changed my thinking in a dramatic way."

The process she devised improves students' academic work, she said, and it leverages skills they've learned through the Oakland district's social-emotional learning strategy, skills like how to listen, how to relate to the experiences of their peers, and how to provide feedback.

Schools that promote comprehensive social-emotional learning focus on three strategies: changing school climate through areas like discipline and family engagement, direct instruction of research-based social-emotional learning curriculum, and incorporating a social-emotional learning approach into traditional classroom work.

Districts that have committed to the strategy, including Oakland, say weaving social-emotional learning strategies into everyday classroom practices can be the most challenging. Strategies are still developing, and when the work feels like a fad, or a new, top-down mandate, teachers are less likely to "buy into it," school leaders say.

Most teachers are also coming to classrooms from schools of education and other **pre-service programs that did little to address social-emotional learning**, forcing them to learn on the job, according to a recent survey of U.S. teacher-preparation programs by researchers at the University of British Columbia.

While social-emotional learning advocates emphasize concepts like prioritizing student discussions over teacher lectures, strategic thinking over a narrow focus on the correct



Zolboo Bayarnyam talks with a fellow student about the effects that words and acts can have during morning circle time in teacher Susannah Young's 2nd grade class.

—Ramin Rahimian for Education Week

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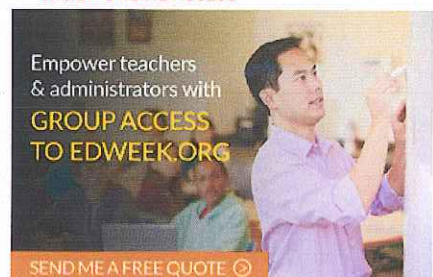
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answer, and giving students a chance to learn from their mistakes through productive failure; many teachers have never had such classroom experiences in their own K-12 educations, said Carrie Wilson, the executive director of Mills teacher scholars.

### 'Adult SEL'

That's why many refer to the program's inquiry process as "adult SEL," the shorthand for social-emotional learning. Before teachers in the program commit to the vulnerable experience of sharing their work with their peers, they have discussions about what they need to learn and how they can help each other meet their goals, Wilson said.

"Our theory of action is that in order for adults, teachers, and principals to be able to provide certain types of learning experiences for students, they have to be able to have those experiences themselves," she said. "When you look at the opportunities for adults in schools to really engage in that type of experience, what we hear from teachers is that they are really few and far between."

The Mills teacher scholars program partners with Oakland and five other districts in the San Francisco Bay Area, leading cohorts of teachers who are focused on a range of academic subjects and teaching areas.

Oakland's cohort, which focuses specifically on social-emotional learning implementation, is made up of about three K-12 teachers from each of five "learning hub schools," including Lincoln, where district leaders are trying new strategies to improve their social-emotional learning approach.

District leaders hope those teachers, who have now participated in the Mills cohort for three years and serve as instructional leaders, will eventually be able to lead the teachers at their own schools in similar inquiry work on-site. It's part of a larger strategy to expand a deeper understanding of social-emotional learning districtwide.

Oakland is one of 10 largely urban school districts that have **partnered with the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL**, to implement comprehensive social-emotional learning strategies and to allow researchers to study their results. Each of those districts—which also include Atlanta, Cleveland, and Anchorage, Alaska—has taken its own approach.



Teacher Susannah Young leads the morning circle time with her 2nd grade students at Lincoln Elementary School.

—Ramin Rahimian for Education Week

Oakland created social-emotional learning standards that outline **age-appropriate strategies for developing relational and cognitive skills** at each grade level, from pre-K to high school. In an unusual move, those standards also apply to the adults working in its schools.

The standards focus on the five competencies that CASEL emphasizes in its definition of social-emotional learning: self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decisionmaking. Every school in the district is required to adopt a research-supported social-emotional learning curriculum that teaches students about skills such as how to recognize and respond to a peer's emotions and how to resolve conflicts.

The challenge for teachers is helping students recognize how they are using those strategies throughout the day, including in their academic work, said Sonny Kim, a program manager in the Oakland district's office of social-emotional learning.

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**21  
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Out of the Trenches and into the Future

By Gary Marx



"We wanted to give teachers space to work this out," he said. "In the classroom, you can think of the teacher as the unit of change. How do we support teachers in really understanding how to teach social-emotional learning? Also, how does it become part of what they do?"

Peer conversations can be a valuable tool for teachers, helping them evaluate their approach and identify successes, Kim said. And teachers can also help each other recognize their own biases and identify the learning needs of specific students, he said.

### 'Focal Students'

That's especially helpful in Oakland, where a mostly white teaching staff teaches racially and ethnically diverse students, Kim said.

For example, at Lincoln Elementary School, which is located in Oakland's Chinatown neighborhood, students are largely from Asian immigrant families. Traditional cultural motifs like dragons hang in the hallways, and school leaders send notes home in both English and Chinese.

Every teacher in the Mills program watches how changes in strategy affect a small group of "focal students," to look for success. Those students may be of varying skill levels or students with particular needs, such as English-language learners.

Malia Tayabas-Kim, a Mills participant who teaches 2nd grade at Oakland's Garfield Elementary School, chose two English-language learners and two higher-level native speakers for her focal students when she completed her first inquiry, which focused on academic discussions of books.

"I would observe them on the playground and see how can they have these conversations that go on forever about Pokémon or basketball ... And I thought, how can I get them to use that in an academic setting?"

After observing their classroom discussions on video with her Mills peers, she realized she needed to help students understand what an academic conversation actually looks like, and how to ask good questions and provide feedback. She had students complete "fishbowls," sitting in a circle around two peers to observe their discussion. And she provided "scaffolding," posters with conversational prompts and questions.

"They could see it, hear it, practice it constantly, and internalize it," Tayabas-Kim said.

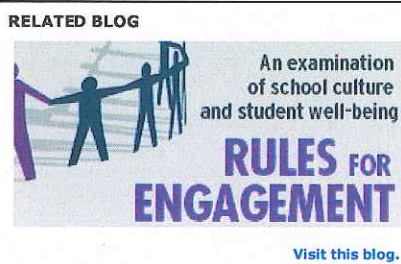
This year, her inquiry focuses on teaching her students to ask their classmates for evidence to support their opinions. That work hones students' academic skills of analytical thinking and reading, and it relies on social skills like how to handle disagreements and how to have constructive conversations, Tayabas-Kim said.

After students mastered asking one another for evidence, she extended the lesson further, helping them identify what makes good evidence and why they should ask for it.

She saw the effects of her work when she witnessed two students discussing a book called "Why Do Puddles Go Away?" The girl who read the book responded to her partner's prompts for evidence by referring back to diagrams as she carefully explained how condensation works.

The inquiry work helped Tayabas-Kim recognize things she might not have noticed in those peer interactions, she said.

"Being able to share my inquiry, having people listen and ask questions," she said, "has moved my thinking forward."





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mcruiz
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11:15 PM on May 5, 2017

So, paraphrasing this article, the main problems with Social-Emotional Learning are, that districts have committed to the concept, while strategies are still in the development stages, and that it is a top down mandate that clearly feels like just another fad.

If it quacks like a duck... well you know the rest. Social-Emotional Learning is just another fad.

MOMwithABrain1
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11:54 PM on May 5, 2017

Just wondering when anyone will focus on reading, writing and arithmetic? Another fad heading our way....!!

Stop turning the classrooms into mental health clinics.

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