

ALIGNING YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

By Misha Evertz

INTRODUCTION

There is a wide range of approaches by which educators strive to support youth in developing the skills they need to exist as successful adults. The field of youth development contains a multitude of frameworks, strategies, and philosophies through which adults attempt to co-create with youth opportunities to develop these skills. Youth organizing and social-emotional learning (SEL) are two approaches within youth development that have seen increased prominence over the past 20 years. However, despite their prominence in a variety of youth programs and schools, they are typically treated as separate approaches to youth development.

In this paper I argue that these two sectors of youth work not only overlap, but complement each other in ways that benefit the healthy development of youth and that by viewing them as separate entities, both SEL programs and youth organizing programs are missing out on key aspects of holistic programming. If youth organizing programs intentionally incorporated aspects of SEL and similarly SEL programming incorporated aspects of civic youth work and organizing, both would benefit.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The field of youth development, focused on the development of competencies and skills needed to succeed in both adolescent and adult life, began to materialize in the United States in the 1980s (HoSang, 2003). A community-based mindset began to be applied in lieu of prevention models that were less holistic in nature and frequently revolved around pathologizing youth. Youth development took on the ideals of the arts, education, and cultural and community identity-forming experiences to provide a well-rounded approach to working with young people. Youth organizing and social-emotional learning, two approaches to youth work, have distinctly different histories.

COMMUNITY AND YOUTH ORGANIZING

Saul Alinsky is championed as the inventor of community organizing, with his work dating back to the 1930s (von Hoffman, 2011). His early work was in Chicago where he organized the Back of the Yards neighborhood and created the Industrial Areas Foundation that focused on training community organizers. He went on to write several books, the most well-known, *Rules for Radicals*, was published in 1971. This book opens with the phrase “What follows is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be. *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away” (Alinsky, 1971, p. 4). This statement highlights Alinsky’s wholehearted confidence that community organizing was a way to influence and shift power dynamics and empower people to create change.

In the 1960s and 1970s, communities of color began adapting and modifying Alinsky’s community organizing model, giving way to the civil rights movement, the anti-war movements, the Chicano movement, the Black Power movement, and many more (Edwards, Johnson, & McGillicuddy, 2000). These movements stemmed from the principle that organizers were deeply rooted in the communities they were organizing.

However, within these movements young people were not given the same agency as other organizers; rather, young people were viewed as the people that would lead tomorrow's movements, but were not yet fit to make decisions that concerned the tasks at hand.

From this reality sprang the idea that young people needed to have voice in the creation and implementation of the youth development programs in which they participated. Similar to the notion that spurred movements in the 1960s—that organizers are more effective in the communities where they are constituents—the shift to include youth voice and input in the design of youth programs gives agency and power to the people it affects. As Jason Warwin states in *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth* (Edwards et al., 2000),

If you had a problem in the black community, and you brought together a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously...There'd probably be a public outcry. It would be the same thing for women's issues or gay issues. Can you imagine a bunch of men sitting on the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Women? But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us (p. 6).

Beginning in the mid-1990s, organizations and programs specific to youth activism and organizing began springing up throughout the nation's large urban centers, signifying the staying power of a movement for increased youth voice and involvement in communities (HoSang, 2003). In today's society that values experience and age, youth are frequently viewed as the "have-nots" when it comes to agency, decision-making, and power. Applying Alinsky's principles of community organizing to youth movements and youth organizing programs and campaigns today, it becomes clear that the organizing principles that he outlines are still relevant to the work. Civic youth work and youth organizing programs work to address this power dynamic by giving youth agency and decision-making power to create the change that they want to see in their communities. While the design of programs varies greatly, as do the foci of the organizing efforts, a common set of principles has emerged, focusing on multi-faceted approaches to change, civic education, and a reliance on staff/mentor organizers (HoSang, 2003).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social-emotional learning is an area that has gained prominence in schools and youth programs in recent years, though roots of this concept go back much further. The concept began gaining traction in the modern era in New Haven, Connecticut through research at Yale University (Edutopia, 2011). The term "social and emotional learning" was coined in 1994 in a positive youth development meeting with researchers, educators, and youth advocates that later formalized to create the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Edutopia, 2011).

SEL is Defined by Elias et al. (1997) as "the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence" (p. 2). In 2005, CASEL outlined five major goal areas for SEL-focused programs to work towards to foster development of these competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Figure 1 illustrates the short-term and behavioral and academic goals of SEL programs.

Figure 1. Outcomes Associated with the Five Competencies



Adapted from CASEL (2013)

Practices to support social-emotional learning can vary, but frequently include a prescribed set of elements to foster acquisition and practice of SEL skills, represented by the acronym SAFE:

Sequenced: Connected and coordinated activities to foster skill development.

Active: Active forms of learning to help students master new skills and attitudes.

Focused: A component that emphasized developing personal and social skills.

Explicit: Targeting specific social and emotional skills.

Currently, SEL is a growing strategy being adopted into more school districts and institutions based on emerging research that reveals the importance of social-emotional skills for both academic and personal success. Studies show that students who build social-emotional skills such as perseverance and goal-setting are more likely to succeed in college and career (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). When students have growth mindset and confidence, they are more likely to persist through challenging academic situations and master critical skills.

Other models and frameworks are laying the groundwork for further SEL work in youth programs that operate outside of the school day, a more natural fit for SEL-focused initiatives. Youth work and out-of-school time programs frequently focus on holistic programming, as opposed to traditional school programs, which lends itself to greater focus on skills outlined in various SEL frameworks. These frameworks frequently focus on adult practitioners and how to best foster SEL in youth programs, versus in a school setting where the CASEL framework focuses. Intentionality in this practice is key. Increasing the intentionality of SEL in programs has been shown to increase SEL outcomes and long-term impact for youth in the program (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2017). By using the aforementioned SAFE framework, practitioners can intentionally facilitate social-emotional learning.

ALIGNING SEL & YOUTH ORGANIZING

As described, SEL and youth organizing can both fall under the wide-sweeping umbrella of youth work, but the manner in which they come to fruition is a point of tension. Social-emotional learning is seen as a process with “teaching” that comes from adult-created and sustained systems unto youth; youth organizing goes in the opposite direction, with youth leading and creating change that influences adult-led systems and communities.

I argue that these two sectors of youth work not only overlap, but complement each other in ways that benefit the healthy development of youth, and by viewing them as separate entities, both SEL programs and youth organizing programs miss out on key aspects of holistic programming. If youth organizing programs intentionally incorporated aspects of social-emotional learning and similarly SEL programming incorporated aspects of civic youth work and organizing, both would benefit.

CASE STUDIES

In order to better illustrate these two approaches, I analyzed two case studies: one focused on a youth organizing effort in Tucson, Arizona and one on a school with an integrated SEL focus in New York City to highlight the overlap between the two fields. I will use cross-analysis to analyze each case through the lens of the alternate approach. It should be noted that both of these accounts are taken from existing literature. I was not there to observe and collect information, nor were these firsthand accounts that I gathered from people involved.

CASE STUDY #1: YOUTH ORGANIZING TO PROTECT ETHNIC STUDIES IN THE TUCSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Source

From the Annenberg Institute for Education Reform’s Voices in Urban Education: Youth Organizing for Education Reform, this account by Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota, titled *Youth Organizing in the Wild West: Mobilizing for Educational Justice in Arizona!*, focuses on the fight for ethnic studies classes in the Tucson Unified School District (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2011).

Youth Organizing in Practice

In 2005, the Tucson Unified School district was one of few in the nation to offer specific ethnic studies programs that addressed the cultural experiences of Mexican American, African American, Asian American, and Native American students through specialized curriculum programs (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2011). After state Republicans witnessed a commencement address calling out the hostile political climate for Mexican Americans, these programs came under fire from local politicians who proposed a series of legislative bills aimed to ban the ethnic studies program in its entirety.

Youth members of the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in the Tucson Unified School district took a stand against these motions through an array of student-led organizing efforts. A MAS English teacher took the lead and assisted the formation of a cross-ethnic public event focused on the importance of diversity of both culture and opinion for learning that garnered enough media attention and support to deny the passage of the legislative bill. The second effort took a stand against a new bill that proposed that courses should be banned that “treat students as members of a particular ethnic group rather than as individuals” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2011, p. 17) and was organized by students in concert with a University of Arizona professor to plan a 100-mile run from Tucson to Phoenix. Once arriving in Phoenix, students and organizers performed a traditional Aztec dance, again harvesting enough buzz and attention to

defeat the successful passage of the bill in the legislature. The third and final proposed bill that students organized against resulted in the planning and execution of a 24-hour vigil; however, despite these efforts the bill passed and was signed into law. Students further led organizing efforts to protest the signing of this legislation, spreading the word until over 500 people participated, eventually moving the mass to the Arizona State building to conduct a sit-in, ending in the arrest of several organizers. To this day, the MAS program is still offered to students in the Tucson Unified School District.

Case Study 1 Cross-Analysis: Youth Organizing through an SEL Lens

I analyzed this series of events from an outside view with a focus on social-emotional learning, thinking specifically about the SEL skills that were likely built upon and also the practices of the adults involved in the organizing efforts. It is apparent that youth involved in these efforts were building and enhancing skills throughout; however, it is also apparent that the focus on these skills was not intentional and did not follow the SAFE framework for social-emotional learning in practice.

The first organizing effort was supported by the high school English teacher that was part of the MAS ethnic studies program and assisted students in the formation of an event that intentionally focused on highlighting the importance of diversity. Based on the account in the article, youth involved in this effort were building and using skills associated with the development of self-identity such as self-confidence, connection, and sense of belonging, all SEL skills identified in the CASEL framework. It is also clear that the youth involved possessed the motivation, drive, and focus to carry out these efforts. The account does not state whether or not this group of youth was primed with an intentional focus on the development of these skills or whether or not there was a reflective practice utilized after the events occurred in which youth discussed their own growth in these areas. However, the presence of an adult facilitator would have allowed for these intentional practices to be utilized to bring personal skill development to the forefront.

The third action, in contrast to the first two, had no adults specifically identified as playing integral roles in the actual planning and coordination of the protest and assembly of people. One explanation for this is that as the youth grew and developed integral skills for organizing, they no longer needed the extra support from an adult. Furthermore, the community backing the opposition to the bill had grown to the point where there was enough community-based support that a single identified facilitator was no longer necessary. Additionally, this last series of events differs from the previous two acts because at first it was unsuccessful and the legislation was signed into law. Specific SEL skills—grit, perseverance, resilience, and determination—are focused on the ability of individuals to overcome setbacks. It is unclear—and given the order of events unlikely—that there was time spent focusing on the setback at hand but that the organizers had already firmly grasped the SEL skills that they needed to carry on with their efforts to reach their intended goal. While youth developed agency through the first two events and drew on that knowledge to organize the third, without intentional SEL in the earlier events, they did not have the tools to facilitate an SEL learning experience for themselves. Had they gone through a reflection process with their facilitator from the start, they may have been able to successfully facilitate that process for themselves as part of this independent action.

As evidenced in this analysis, social-emotional learning and skill development are common in youth organizing efforts and initiatives, but the focus on these skills is not at the forefront. This study also clearly delineates the idea that skills aren't always being "taught," but that they can be acquired and honed through practice and application. However, the intentionality of the adult facilitators recognizing and reflecting on the fact that these skills are being learned, practiced, and refined through these experiences is an integral part of reinforcing and building on this growth for youth.

CASE STUDY #2: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING TO INSPIRE COMMUNITY AND AGENCY IN NEW YORK CITY

Source

Developing Agency from Community, by Kathleen Cushman of What Kids Can Do (WKCD), focuses on the work of a school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City. The study is part of “Learning by Heart: Five American High Schools Where Social and Emotional Learning Are Core, Case Studies of Practice.”

SEL in Practice

East Side Community School on the Lower East Side of Manhattan is a school that is committed not only to rigorous academics, but also to the development of personal relationships among teachers and students. Cushman (2014) states, “East Side regards community as the prime mover of education in a democracy, and builds the habits of citizenship on mutually respectful relationships between family, staff, students, and community. It has kept its eyes on the core values it prizes: knowing all its diverse students well, and developing their agency equally in the social, emotional, and academic spheres” (p. 1).

Three distinct practices at this school help to drive the SEL focus and culture. The first practice is to illuminate and highlight connections in learning social-emotional skills. Through this, teachers build strong relationships with students and explore the actions and reactions of students through a social-emotional lens. The second practice is the student-teacher advisory structure that has been implemented with the goal of building trust and deepening relationships with students. One East Side Community school teacher recalls a project completed at the beginning of the year with her group of advisees to explore self-identity:

They made two boxes: what you think about yourself, and what you think other people think about you. When we discussed it, they realized that a lot of what they think about themselves is totally different than what other kids think about them. And it's actually positive. Like kids were writing, "I think other people think I'm shy" or "Other people think I don't have a lot to say." And other students were like, "What?! You talk all the time!" So it's just for them to think about perception. And a good exercise, too, for teachers— 'cause we do that with them, too (Cushman, 2014, p. 15).

The final practice is participation in a curriculum called *Facing History and Ourselves*, which focuses on ethical dilemmas in history, how those scenarios can be applied to students' lives, and reflection on decisions made and their implications. The mission of the curriculum is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. Through the use of this curriculum, students are able to explore questions of belonging, identity, and agency in others' lives and then work to apply the meaning to their own lives. Other SEL skills are intentionally developed and practiced throughout, including communication, active listening, and understanding others' feelings via discussions that facilitate the application of skills to their own lives.

Specifically focusing on the use of a curriculum that aims to facilitate discussions about historical oppression, East Side Community School is intentionally incorporating explicit SEL instruction, teacher instructional practices, and integrating it with academic curriculum areas. This approach aligns with the SAFE framework laid out by CASEL.

Activities are *sequenced* so that content is scaffolded throughout all four years of participation in the curriculum. Students are encouraged to practice and apply the skills they are learning outside of the classroom, a form of *active learning*. One specific anecdote from the text exemplifies active learning:

In one assignment ‘we had to break a norm,’ a student named Edwin said. ‘You know how on public transportation, if it’s empty you don’t sit next to somebody? Well, I tried to sit next to somebody, and you could definitely tell that they were frustrated. But we also looked at why people don’t get frustrated if the bus is packed and you sit next to them’ (Cushman, 2014, p. 6).

This illustrates the application of SEL. After learning about what constitutes social norms, how they are constructed, and how they are upheld, Edwin used that information to challenge those norms. The focused and explicit aspects of the SAFE framework are being addressed by using this targeted curriculum in addition to curriculum that focuses on common core standards and core subject learning.

Case Study 2 Cross-Analysis: Social-Emotional Learning through a Youth Organizing Lens

While East Side Community School infuses SEL into several aspects of the school day, the students’ social-emotional learning experience could be enriched by the inclusion of youth organizing. A seemingly natural fit with the agency and community-building on which the school focuses, this would allow youth to practice and hone SEL skills gained through active application. Youth organizing principles are youth-centric by nature, highlighting the ideals of youth voice and choice as a means of engaging youth.

By incorporating youth organizing into the *Facing History and Ourselves* curriculum, not only would youth learn about civic engagement from a historic perspective, but they could apply their historical knowledge to practice. The real-world application of classroom learning facilitates and strengthens the transfer of knowledge and allows youth to explore topics of their own accord. Again, intentional practice and reflection is essential for success.

Creating an opportunity for students to explore youth organizing around an issue they care about, in a supportive environment, would strengthen both the social-emotional skill development and the academic learning in the *Facing History and Ourselves* curriculum. By using the historic accounts of discrimination and prejudice as a foundation, teachers could facilitate opportunities for students to engage in activism around current issues. With the existing SEL framework built into the curriculum, it would be relatively easy for teachers or facilitators to coach students through both activism and social-emotional learning simultaneously. Furthermore, engaging in activism in the present day will bring new meaning to lessons about related topics in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

These case studies provide rationale for my argument that youth organizing and social-emotional learning are intertwined and complementary, each with the ability to enhance youth development and learning in a high quality program. While youth organizing and SEL are frequently approached as separate entities, in this discussion there is room for each to grow to intentionally incorporate elements of the other. I lay out the benefits of incorporating elements of one approach into the other, while recognizing that not all youth-organizing programs are viable spaces to include SEL, just as not all programs with an SEL focus are viable opportunities to incorporate youth organizing.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND YOUTH ORGANIZING ALIGNMENT

Social-emotional learning is already happening in most youth-organizing programs due to the nature of the work, but it is treated as an unintended positive side effect of the work rather than an intentionally incorporated learning opportunity. The first case study shows that youth participating in organizing were drawing on the concepts of self-identity, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. They continued to build on these skills and grow throughout, eventually organizing without the direct leadership of an adult. Becoming an effective activist and organizer requires the use of social-emotional skills. Time spent building these skills will lead to better organizing outcomes. Ben Kirshner describes the existence of SEL in youth organizing, stating that if you “dig beneath ethno-graphic studies of youth organizing, you will find many of the practices called for by SEL researchers, even though they are not always designed as the primary purpose of the organization” (Kirshner, 2014, p. 2).

However, research shows that the intentional integration of reflection allows youth to evaluate experiences and make deeper connections to their own lives (Blyth et al., 2017). This in turn helps to internalize the SEL skills that youth have learned and affords youth the ability to apply those skills to other situations. Without intentional reflection, youth don’t make the connection to the skills being built, but focus on the community outcomes. Explicitly reflecting and talking about skills that are used to achieve those outcomes allows youth to understand how their work benefits both their own growth and their communities. Emphasizing and building upon the learning that is already taking place as youth participate in organizing can only enhance outcomes, both for individual growth and the success of the organizing efforts. Because social-emotional skill building is often already happening in youth organizing, the incorporation of simple intentional SEL practices can provide lasting impact for youth without drastic programmatic changes.

Just as youth-organizing programs benefit from SEL, SEL programs can benefit from the inclusion of elements of youth organizing. Generally, youth who seek out organizing programs are confident in their ability to speak up. By incorporating elements of youth organizing into SEL programs that aren’t solely focused on youth civic engagement and organizing, youth who are less prone to stand up and fight for what they believe in will have the ability to experiment and learn to use their voices through active participation. Youth organizing is a clear next step in a social-emotional learning experience. It provides students an opportunity to use their skills in a safe and supportive environment while engaging in active learning with real-world applications and impact.

Konopka articulates the idea that experimentation and application are key components to youth development:

Since experimentation is essential to learning, adolescents should have the opportunity to discover their own strengths and weaknesses in a host of different situations, to experience success and also learn how to cope with adversity and defeat. These skills are usually acquired through active participation. Therefore, adolescents should have a genuine chance to participate as citizens, as members of households, as workers—in general, as responsible members of society (Konopka, 1973, “Conditions For Healthy Development of Youth,” para. 8).

These ideas can be applied when considering the incorporation of youth organizing into SEL. Programs that incorporate SEL can grow by including organizing as way to actively apply the skills being learned and youth

organizing programs can enhance the growth of participants by talking intentionally about skills being acquired through the process.

Kirshner discusses the importance of political and social context as a lever for engagement in youth organizing programs, stating that “the emerging SEL movement misses out on critical insights from the youth organizing held about the importance of sociopolitical context and young people’s collective agency” (Kirshner, 2014, p. 2). While the second case study focuses on a school that intentionally incorporates the sociopolitical context that contributes to the agency of young people, they lack the opportunities for youth to apply those skills in the real world.

A successful incorporation of youth organizing into social-emotional learning would extend youth experiences in the classroom out into the real world, where they would have the opportunity to engage in activism or advocacy around a cause about which they feel passionate. The combination of those experiences within an SEL program helps to create a safe environment, with support of adult facilitators, for youth to practice new skills, build on existing skills, and grow both individually and collectively.

Together, SEL and youth organizing have the ability to not only coexist, but complement each other and lead to increased positive experiences for youth. The combination of these two approaches to youth work can create a cycle in which youth learn SEL skills, bring those to youth organizing, reflect on their experiences bringing it back to social-emotional learning, and vice versa. By treating these as complementary parts of a learning cycle, we enrich youths’ SEL and youth organizing experiences, and foster a collaborative learning environment for youth.

CONCLUSION

Through historical context, case studies, and discussion, this paper illustrates the rationale for the intentional combination of social-emotional learning and youth organizing. Case Study 1 exemplifies a strong youth organizing initiative without the intentional incorporation of social-emotional learning. Case Study 2 exemplifies a strong social-emotional learning program without intentional incorporation of youth organizing. Analysis provides avenues by which the two approaches can be aligned and combined in a cycle that encourages youth to develop social-emotional skills and engage in youth organizing simultaneously. While each field individually provides ample opportunities for youth to gain skills and agency, the two can be easily combined to further enhance the youths’ experiences. Social-emotional learning and youth organizing are two youth development fields that both overlap and complement one another in promoting youth development but are often kept separate in schools and youth programming. Incorporating elements of youth organizing into social-emotional learning and elements of social-emotional learning into youth organizing strengthens, enriches, and improves youth programs within both fields.

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