

A Brief Look at Education for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

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“Can virtue be taught?”
Socrates

Among today’s educational experts there is general agreement that social and emotional virtues can be learned. Social and emotional learning occurs naturally when young people are passionately involved in something in which they have a major interest. American school policy makers continue (for political reasons) to debate which values should be taught and they also disagree widely on the best way to teach them. My best suggestion for promoting SEL in a genuine way is to have young people who share a common interest work together in small groups to address projects and problems that they would like to confront. Since colonial times, affective, or character development as it has frequently been referred to, has been a facet of American school learning. John Dewey’s early influence on the American education system provided some of the philosophical basis for character education in today’s schools. Dewey believed that character education should enable students to learn how to act, so that in any situation they will behave morally. Research conducted by Hartshorne and May in the 1930s supported Dewey’s aversion to the direct teaching of character education and found that participation in projects and the pursuit of real problems was the best way to promote non-cognitive traits associated with SEL (Leming, 1993). More recent research has found a greater correlation between character education participation and moral conduct (Rushton, Brainerd, & Pressley, 1983; Wynne, 1989).

Kohlberg’s cognitive-developmental theory provides a framework of the moral development process from birth through adulthood (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971). A series of six stages organized into three levels provide a sequence through which morality is developed. During progression through the preconventional level, one learns the consequences of one’s own actions. Rules and fairness govern actions. Development in the conventional level removes the focus from oneself to an emphasis on one’s place in society. Duties and social order govern actions as the individual learns the importance of having societal norms. The postconventional level of development marks a period in which the individual no longer accepts the imposition of law and establishes an ethical relativism for any given situation. In the 1970s, Lawrence Kohlberg (1975) connected his cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning to character education programming in schools.

Operation Houndstooth

One of the more fortunate directions in the social sciences in recent years has been the development of the positive psychology movement. Championed by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), this movement focuses on enhancing what is good in life in addition to fixing what is maladaptive. The goal of positive psychology is to create a science of human strengths that will help us to understand and learn how to foster socially constructive virtues in

young people. Although all of society's institutions need to be involved in helping to shape positive values and virtues, schools play an especially important part today due to the changes in family structures and because people of all ages now spend more than one fifth of their lives engaged in some kind of schooling. In a research study dealing with developing excellence in young people, Larson (2000) found that average students report being bored about one third of the time. He speculates that participation in civic and socially engaging activities might hold the key to overcoming the disengagement and disaffection that are rampant among American young people. He argues that components of positive development—for example, initiative, creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement can result from early and continuous opportunities to participate in experiences that promote characteristics associated with the production of social capital.

The positive psychology movement, coupled with our continuing fascination with the scientific components that give rise to socially constructive giftedness has led us to examine the personal attributes that form the framework of a project called Operation Houndstooth (Renzulli, 2008), the name emanating from the interconnected “houndstooth” pattern that forms the background of the three-ring conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 1978). This theory argues that it is the interactive personality traits and the environmental landscape that give rise to abilities, creativity, and task commitment. A comprehensive review of the literature and a series of Delphi technique classification studies led to the development of an organizational plan for studying the six components that make up the framework for Operation Houndstooth (Renzulli, 2002; Sytsma, 2003). These components are summarized in Figure 1 and briefly described below.

- *Optimism.* Optimism includes cognitive, emotional, and motivational components and reflects the belief that the future holds good outcomes. Optimism may be thought of as an attitude associated with expectations of a future that is socially desirable, to the individual's advantage, or to the advantage of others. It is characterized by a sense of hope and a willingness to accept hard work.
- *Courage.* Courage is the ability to face difficulty or danger while overcoming physical, psychological, or moral fears. Integrity and strength of character are typical manifestations of courage, and they represent the most salient marks of those creative people who actually increase social capital.
- *Romance with a topic or discipline.* When an individual is passionate about a topic or discipline, a true romance, characterized by powerful emotions and desires, evolves. The passion of this romance often becomes an image of the future in young people and provides the motivation for a long-term commitment to a course of action.
- *Sensitivity to human concerns.* This trait encompasses the abilities to comprehend another's affective world and to communicate such understanding accurately and sensitively through action. Altruism and empathy, aspects of which are evident throughout human development, characterize this trait.

OPERATION HOUNDSTOOTH

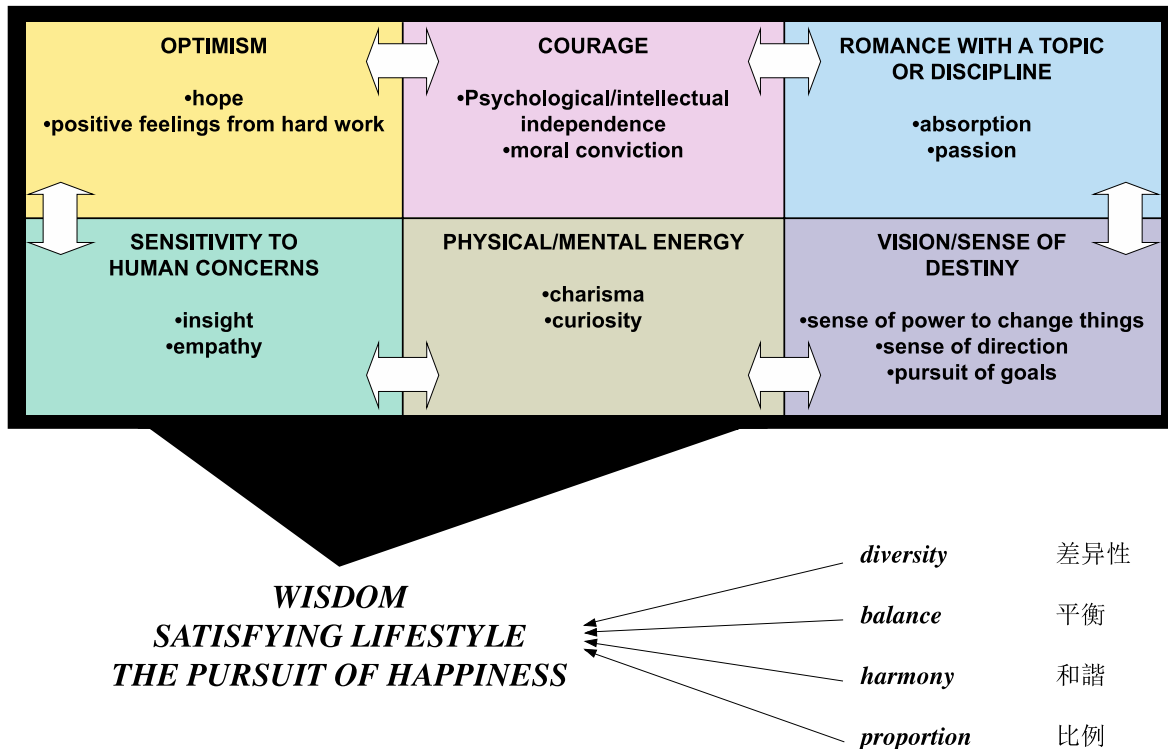
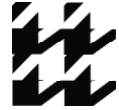


Figure 1. Graphic representation of Operation Houndstooth Theory

- *Physical/mental energy.* All people have this trait in varying degrees, but the amount of energy an individual is willing and able to invest in the achievement of a goal is a crucial issue in high levels of accomplishment. In the case of eminent individuals, this energy investment is a major contributor to task commitment. Charisma and curiosity are frequent correlates of high physical and mental energy.
- *Vision/sense of destiny.* Complex and difficult to define, vision or a sense of destiny may be described best by a variety of interrelated concepts, such as internal locus of control, motivation, volition, and self-efficacy. When an individual has a vision or sense of destiny about future activities, events, and involvements, that vision serves to stimulate planning and to direct behavior; it becomes an incentive for present behavior.

Of course, many interactions take place between and among these six components. We will refer to these components as *co-cognitive factors* because they interact with and enhance the cognitive traits that we ordinarily associate with success in school and with the overall development of human abilities. The literature reviewing the empirical research that resulted in the identification of these components can be found by visiting our website [<https://gifted.uconn.edu/>]. The first phase of our research included clarifying definitions and identifying, adapting, and constructing assessment procedures that have extended our understanding of the components, especially as they are exhibited by young people.

A major assumption underlying this project is that all the components defined in our background research are subject to modification. Thus, the second phase of the project consists of a series of experimental studies to determine how various school-related interventions can promote the types of behavior associated with each of the components. These interventions draw upon existing and newly developed techniques that can be used within various school and extracurricular contexts.

Conclusion

The goal of Operation Houndstooth is to develop in students the six co-cognitive factors mentioned above. These are traits that many gifted students and adults already exhibit and may adopt quickly. Each level of the Houndstooth Intervention Theory leads students closer to the constructive development of gifted behaviors and the internalization of the co-cognitive factors. Our goal is for students to become creative producers at the highest level of the Houndstooth Intervention Theory (Renzulli, Koehler, & Fogarty, 2006) by internalizing a combination of the six co-cognitive traits. By employing this intervention, schools will encourage a new generation of students to use their gifts in socially constructive ways and seek ways to improve the lives of others rather than merely using their talents only for economic gain, self-indulgence, and the exercise of power without a commitment to contribute to the improvement of life and resources on the planet.

An Easy Way to Find Resources for SEL Teaching Activities

To find activities for students go to Google, CHATGBT, or another search of your preference. Select one of the words from the figure above (e.g., Passion, Curiosity, etc.) and enter it into the search engine as follows: “Find student activities that teach about Passion?”

References

You can also find more detailed articles related research on Houndstooth in the second two references below, which include most of the references mentioned above.

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