

## **For better life outcomes, integrate SEL with decision-making strategies**

When you ask most adults what it means to have a high quality of life, they will probably mention maintaining good health, having positive relationships and being able to afford the basics and also some fun stuff. So what do we need to achieve it? Of course, the basic literacy and numeracy skills we learn in school are essential, but as the skills needed to navigate life in the digital age evolve, it will take more. We cannot predict exactly what knowledge students will need to thrive, but we can be sure their life outcomes will be a result of both chance and their choices. We can help the next generation avoid the wasted time and negative outcomes of trying to learn from experience. When we incorporate instruction in decision-making strategies into K-12 education, specifically as part of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, students will be able to approach personal and professional issues in ways that make greater life satisfaction possible.

It is a common lament that school does not teach enough practical material, but that does not mean we should be lobbying for classes that cover filing taxes, applying for a mortgage, or the many other headaches of adulthood that are better left to as-needed online tutorials. Instead, school's job should be to teach us how to think, not memorize procedures that quickly become useless. Instruction in decision-making strategies can train students to analyze issues flexibly, no matter how the world changes or which professions and lifestyles they pursue. For decades now, the healthcare (Parkin, 2017), energy (Neal and Spetzler, 2015) and finance (Pinkasovitch, 2018) fields have been applying decision analysis informed by cognitive science research (Holt, 2011) to improve their performance, and their leaders have described their methods in a library's worth of business strategy books (Business Insider, 2011), but MBA students should not be the only group learning how these insights can help them get an edge. Everyone can benefit. As early as elementary school we can start teaching students better ways to stay calm and focused, structure their habits, respond to in-the-moment choices and make well-considered long-term decisions.

A growing number of schools are laying the foundation for instruction in decision-making strategies because they make time for SEL programs. For example, when students learn how to calm and refocus themselves with mindfulness techniques, they are in a better position to tap into the higher-order thinking skills that lead to making better decisions. And lessons that develop character traits like growth mindset and curiosity help them recognize that self-improvement is an everyday mission, not just something to do when we encounter a serious problem. SEL can help make students' brains more ready to tackle the tough choices we face throughout our lives (West, 2016).

Decision-making strategies can help us every day, not just in occasional ordeals like resolving alternatives for a school, job or relationship. Here are some examples of how they can extend the reach of SEL:

- Managing habits: habits like eating junk food when we are stressed develop subconsciously if we do not know how they operate. When we are not aware of the



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Journal of Research in Innovative  
Teaching & Learning  
Vol. 12 No. 1, 2019  
pp. 7-9  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
2397-7604  
DOI 10.1108/JRIT-01-2019-0004

cues in our environments that prompt certain behaviors and the satisfaction we get from them (despite the eventual negative side effects), we get stuck in frustrating habit loops. Knowledge of habit psychology (Duhigg, 2019) helps us design plans to stay on track.

- Avoiding cognitive biases (misjudgments that lead to irrational thinking): when students can recognize how advertisements frame purchasing situations as absolutes that define their identity and threaten how they fit into the social order, they are more likely to examine what is motivating them to spend their money. Instruction in decision strategies would teach students to be on the lookout for emotional manipulations, like the bandwagon effect (Kenton, 2018), the halo effect (Cherry, 2018) and the anchoring effect (McRaney, 2010), whenever ads target them.
- Assessing likelihoods (also known as subjective probability): most efforts to teach probability focus on situations like the chances of choosing a particular marble from a bag, where all information is certain and there is an objectively correct answer. Those cases are rare in real life, and the traditional approach does little to help students understand that the world is not black and white. Being able to identify and value informal evidence and estimate that something is “30 percent likely to happen” (not impossible, but not a given) improves students’ abilities to make choices that will benefit them. Subjective probability applies not only to the events that we already recognize as momentous, like choosing where to apply to college based on the likelihood of acceptance and affordability, but also to regular frictions like choosing whether to talk to a classmate from a different clique based on our estimate of the likelihood that she will reject our friendly introduction. We often find that we can lessen our anxiety when we pause to identify the range of realistic outcomes of a choice.

When we start recognizing that how we form our habits, judgments and beliefs are ways of making decisions about our lives, we realize that our happiness is at stake if we fail to approach them without thinking about our thinking. SEL programs at selected schools are starting the work of helping students construct happier lives, and administrators and teachers can build on this momentum when they incorporate instruction in decision-making strategies into these blocks of time. If we help students hone an awareness of their daily opportunities to make decisions, they will be more likely to engage in the kind of self-questioning that helps them select options that will enhance their quality of life, which should be the ultimate goal of their education.

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