“How was your day at school today...?”

When we ask a young person this common question, typically what we hear will not have as much to do with math, reading, science, or any other academic aspect from that day. Instead, the more likely response will have something to do with the social aspects of school -- the conversations had with friends; a disagreement with a classmate; or a positive or negative interaction with a teacher. Although these social experiences have a direct impact on students’ academic outcomes, the social side of schooling receives less attention than the academic side (Hanish, Martin, Miller, Fabes, DeLay, & Updegraff, 2016).

Educational leaders and policymakers are realizing the importance of promoting social emotional learning within schools and educational organizations. Why? Because the research on social emotional learning (or SEL) shows that developing students’ social and emotional skills and competencies also benefits academic-related outcomes. Students are more likely to flourish and thrive academically when they are in educational settings that support their social and emotional needs.

Furthermore, according to Hanish et al., (2016) social and emotional skills can be effectively taught in schools, which has a direct impact on improving school-related outcomes (i.e., self-esteem and academic performance), and decreasing disruptive behaviors. In other words, schools and key educational organizations can infuse everyday practices into their curriculum, and into their school culture, for students to develop and practice social and emotional learning skills.

Sanford Harmony is one example of a social emotional learning program that has the potential to positively impact students and schools. This paper summarizes the research evidence for the Harmony program, based on the work of Laura D. Hanish, Carol Lynn Martin, Cindy Faith Miller, Richard A. Fabes, Dawn DeLay, and Kimberly A. Updegraff in their 2016 article: Social Harmony in Schools: A Framework for Understanding Peer Experiences and Their Effects. To begin the paper, the discussion will examine the conceptual framework and key educational concepts that have guided the Hanish et al., (2016) Harmony Study.
**Background**

Various dynamics influence how students approach and navigate peer relationships within an educational setting. There are three important components to keep in mind. The first is that each individual comes to school with varying experiences and levels of *relationship competency*, which includes social and emotional skills and relationship-oriented cognitions and affect (i.e., the feelings a student may have about forming relationships with others). These feelings shape how comfortable students feel in classrooms, and may have an impact on school-related activities. When many students have high levels of relationship competency, social harmony is enhanced.

Second, the students’ *peer relationship experiences and contexts* are important considerations. Peer relationships are multifaceted and complex. Whereas some relationships exist in pairs, others exist in group settings. Some relationships are more positive than others and vary in strength of relational ties. Social harmony is most likely to occur when these relational ties are positive, and greater interconnectedness is experienced in healthier school environments. The concept of interconnectedness is important and implies that there is less likelihood that a student will experience isolation or loneliness.

Finally, a third component that is critical for promoting social harmony is described as *school support for peer relationships*. The level of school support for peer relationships, including administrative support, can provide a foundation to support the development of relationship competence and of building relationships. School-level norms and policies can influence and support relationship competencies, and teachers’ relationships with other staff members, parents, and students can serve as models for relationship building.

>“Despite the clear importance of social harmony to learning, creating harmonious school environments can be difficult.... Relationship-building skills, such as communicating effectively, understanding diversity, and social problem solving must be acquired with effort, practice, and support, just as many other skills are acquired at school”* (Hanish et al., 2016, p. 57).

**Evidence for Harmony**

Nationally recognized SEL researchers at Arizona State University (ASU) examined how to address the need for relationship building within schools. Sanford Harmony was developed and researched over the course of several years as a preschool and elementary classroom-based program that can be effectively administered by teachers. This paper now turns to examining the key findings on Harmony that emerged from the work based at ASU.
Harmony lessons provide students with opportunities to practice and develop positive peer interactions through activities that can easily be integrated into existing curriculum. Harmony supports teachers, as well as administrators, in creating a school environment that is conducive to relationship building. The training component is a significant aspect of the Harmony program, since equipping teachers with the necessary skills and competencies to model relationship building may influence students’ relationship-building skills.

Based on the implementation of Harmony (in whole or in part) in approximately 150 preschool and elementary school classrooms in more than 20 schools, researchers examined the usability and satisfaction of the program. Outcome analyses from two short-term evaluation trials showed that the program was successful in specific key indicators, including improved relational competency, increased breadth of peer relationships, enhancement of peer socialization processes, increased social climate, and greater academic performance (Hanish et al., 2016). In other words, Harmony works to create school environments that encourage the development of social and emotional learning through school culture, school policies, and through the opportunities that are provided to develop relationships with peers.

The research published by Hanish et al., (2016) reinforces earlier findings that Harmony provides lessons covering a range of topics that are relevant and important to relationship building, because they provide opportunities for students to practice relationship-building skills through games and activities. Notably, Martin et al., (2014) has documented that in tests of students participating in relationship-building lessons for a five-month period, students reported greater classroom climate and connection to school, compared to students in the control classroom who did not participate in the program. In addition, the study showed an increase in positive peer interactions for classrooms with the Harmony program, which has implications for the overall classroom climate and, therefore, student learning and success.

Alignment with CASEL Standards
In 1994, as the term, “social emotional learning” was becoming more popular, the organization CASEL (Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning) was founded, which helped to establish and define social and emotional learning as an important goal in education. As a non-profit organization, CASEL guides and accredits existing and newly emerging social emotional learning initiatives and programs. CASEL provides the professional guidelines for developing and implementing social and emotional learning programs. Harmony is not yet a CASEL-approved program but is in line with its five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship

The Sanford Education Center uses a collaborative evaluation approach, which encourages alignment between Harmony and each educational partner’s own mission and goals. Most importantly, collaborative evaluation helps to ensure that Harmony is meeting the needs of students across various communities and educational settings (e.g., schools, early childhood programs, after-school programs, etc.). Information reported directly from students and teachers through surveys, as well as observations of Harmony in action, are examples of the sources of evidence used in the evaluation process.

**Resources:**


Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History  
http://www.edutopia.org/social-emotional-learning-history

*The Sanford Education Center was formally launched in September 2014 and is part of the Sanford College of Education. The Sanford Education Center’s mission is to create positive societal change through the development of nonprofit leaders and inspirational educators. Harmony is one program of the Sanford Education Center. As of May 2016, Harmony has been used by over 1,000 schools, implemented in 17 states, and reached 180,905 students. Philanthropist T. Denny Sanford supports Sanford Harmony.*