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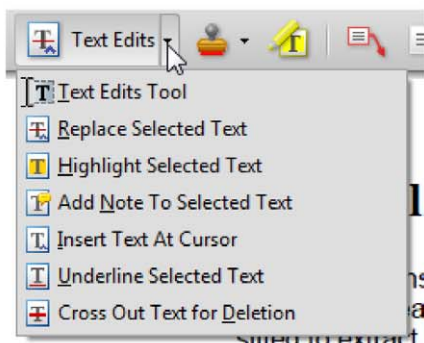
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Developing social and emotional aspects of learning: the American experience

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Developments in American policy, research and professional development to promote social and emotional learning in schools have drawn on work carried out by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), encouraged by the popular and political catalyst of Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence. Based on CASEL's exploration and articulation of the implications of emotional intelligence for schools, this article defines 'social and emotional learning' as part of character development and draws on empirical studies of successful implementation to outline principles of effective intervention. In a context where, despite political rhetoric about a flourishing and progressive education system, a seemingly intractable achievement gap affects particular social and ethnic groups, the article evaluates key influences and ongoing barriers to successful realisation of the goals of social and emotional learning in American schools.

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Keywords: social and emotional learning; achievement gap; character development

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Introduction

The publication of Goleman's (1995) worldwide best-selling book, emotional intelligence, was the catalyst that created the emergent field of social emotional learning (SEL). To be sure, scientists, educators, parents, employers and others were long aware of the importance of social, social-cognitive and emotional development for human functioning (Bar-On, Maree, and Elias 2007). Nevertheless, Goleman's book was a high-profile, popular catalyst which crystallised and unified many strands of research, theory and practice, including insights from neuroscience which highlighted the central role of emotion in all human functioning. Others have subsequently elaborated, both empirically and theoretically, the role that emotion plays in learning, and in education more generally (Lemerise and Arsenio 2000; Saarni 2007).

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Goleman's work led to the creation of Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), then known as the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning, to more fully explore and articulate the implications of emotional intelligence for schools. Among the empirical pillars of Goleman's work on emotional intelligence were data from several school-based interventions designed to improve SEL that, in so doing, also generated improvements in positive behaviours, learning-to-learn behaviours, self-efficacy and academic performance, as

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well as declines in problem behaviours such as aggression, withdrawal, anxiety and substance abuse (Goleman 1995).

What is SEL?

Perhaps it is worth taking a step backward to examine the definition of SEL. Goleman did not use the term, SEL; that was articulated in the founding of CASEL, and CASEL introduced the field of SEL in the book, *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning* (Elias et al. 1997). CASEL's thinking about SEL was built on a foundation of research from groups, such as the Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence (Elias et al. 1996) and the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (2002) that predated the term emotional intelligence but clearly contributed to its articulation.

From this research, CASEL identified a core set of social and emotional skills that underlie performance on a wide range of life tasks (Elias et al. 1997). SEL was defined as the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs to identify and manage emotions; to care about others; to make good decisions; to behave ethically and responsibly; to develop positive relationships and to avoid negative behaviours. SEL is connected to academic achievement, because it embodies skills necessary for succeeding in the classroom, in the life of the school, in the family, in the community, in the workplace and, indeed, in life in general.

These skill areas are now grouped into what is commonly known as 'the CASEL Five':

- (1) *Self-awareness* – recognising one's emotions and values, and being able to realistically assess one's strengths and limitations.
- (2) *Self-management* – being able to set and achieve goals, and handling one's own emotions so that they facilitate rather than interfere with relevant tasks.
- (3) *Social awareness* – showing understanding and empathy for the perspective and feelings of others.
- (4) *Relationship skills* – establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, working effectively in groups as both leader and team member, and dealing constructively with conflict.
- (5) *Responsible decision-making and problem solving* – making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behaviour.

Drawing from research in brain-behaviour relationships, social learning theory and developmental and prevention science, these skill areas are similar to the main dimensions of emotional intelligence identified by Bar-On (2007) and Salovey (2007) and to those adopted by major school-based competence promotion curriculum innovators (Elias and Arnold 2006).

However, SEL implies more than a set of skills; it implies a pedagogy for building those skills and an intervention structure to support the internalisation and generalisation of the skills over time and across contexts. Indeed, SEL implies that there is a developmental trajectory for these key skills and that how they are instructed by parents, educators, peers and other key influences in a child's life. The teaching of SEL is guided by two core insights: emotions affect how and what we learn, and relationships provide a foundation for all lasting learning (Elias et al. 1997; Saarni 2007).

It is worth noting, for the historical record, that CASEL's influence coincided with a fateful meeting held by the CASEL Leadership Team and a group of school superintendents from around the USA at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The topic of conversation was, 'If SEL is so important to learning and to academic success, why aren't schools embracing it more?' The answer was uniform and fascinating: schools are so focused on academic achievement that they cannot take time away for social and emotional factors. Unless CASEL's work is more centrally tied to academic achievement, it will not catch on widely.

The outcome of deliberations following this feedback was a change in CASEL's name, to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. The acronym remained the same, but the name incorporated the academic link explicitly. And CASEL's fortunes, and the influence and penetration of SEL in the language of education, school psychology, school counselling, school social work, school-based research and prevention and related fields, has grown steadily.

As Dunkelblau (2009) has articulated, SEL has undergone a transition recently due to a functional accommodation with work undertaken in the tradition of character or moral education. Founded several years prior to CASEL, The Character Education Partnership (CEP; www.character.org) has operationalised its 11 principles of character into a rubric used to designate winners of its National School of Character (NSOC) award. It is worth noting that the field of character education preceded the founding of CEP, just as the SEL field predated the founding of CASEL. The reason these two traditions did not intersect sooner reflected two major trends in the early years of character education: (1) tendency to not systematically evaluate interventions and (2) the use of pedagogical strategies nor reflective of a social-learning/cognitive-behavioural approach (Elias et al. 2007).

However, the NSOC concept underlines an important emphasis of CEP that has found its way into SEL practice: the context in which skills are developed matters a great deal. CEP defines 'character' in terms of two major dimensions, moral character, which is knowing the morally proper action to take and performance character, which is having the skills and dispositions to enact one's moral character (CEP 2010). An NSOC winner has a school culture that emphasises and has structures to create the best from staff and teachers in both dimensions.

Performance character, of course, bears many similarities to SEL, and CEP recommendations for performance character draw from SEL-related research. Historically, movements for character and moral education have emphasised 'knowing the good', often with the implicit assumption that actions should follow this knowledge, or at least that a great deal of effort would not be needed to create that congruence (Dunkelblau 2009). However, evaluations of programmes and advances in research and theory, particularly about emotional and social development, have made it clear that the road from intention to action is complex and that an array of skills are needed to navigate the road toward successful interventions successfully (Berkowitz and Bier 2006).

Similarly, SEL proponents have come to realise that in a school culture characterised by negative interpersonal relationships, low expectation of students, no clear sense of shared positive purpose and few mechanisms for the development of supportive communities among educator or students. SEL skills may not be employed well or, worse, may be employed for questionable ends. Therefore, greater attention has been paid to the integration of social, emotional and character development and the need to organise school programming and structures to address core values/essential

life habits and the skills needed to enact those habits (Elias 2009; Lickona and Davidson 2007). One tool used by some schools to define core values is the concept of 'touchstones' (Elbot and Fulton 2008). Touchstones are developed over a time through a collaborative and inclusive whole school process and lead to one or more 'we' statements that embody the focal direction of the school and then are accompanied by a more elaborated 'mission statement' and code of conduct. Examples of touchstones include 'We pursue excellence in scholarship and character' and 'We are a learning place, where dreams are born, caring is shown, and leaders are made'.

The conceptual link between SEL and school and life success

Based on existing empirical evidence, Zins et al. (2004) provide a general model of how evidence-based SEL programming operates to have a positive long-term effect on success in school and life. Their choice of the latter as the main dependent variable is important, because they realised that success in school alone is not the end product; indeed, as school success has become defined narrowly, in terms of academic test score performance, there is considerable reason to not equate school success with life success unconditionally.

Zins et al. (2004) note that high-quality programmes must be embedded within safe, caring, well-managed and cooperative classroom environments, as well as wider settings that provide equitable opportunities for positive participation and recognition. These programmes must explicitly teach the CASEL five set of social-emotional skills systematically and developmentally. From this set of factors, students come to feel significant engagement, attachment and commitment to their schools, feel empowered to enact their skill set. As a result, skills are built in ongoing ways within caring contexts to which students feel strong connections and which afford pathways for success. This creates more disincentive for engaging in dysfunctional behaviour than might otherwise be the case, and increases the likelihood of positive distal outcomes, such as success in school and life.

At a more detailed level, it makes sense that students who increase their social-emotional competencies will become more self-aware and develop better academic self-efficacy as they see a better correlation between effort and outcome; this sets up a reinforcing cycle in which students who try harder, motivate themselves, set goals, effectively manage their stress, make responsible decisions about approaching and engaging in their school work and homework and use sound decision-making to build and keep positive adult and peer relationships and overcome setbacks will indeed accomplish more academically, socially and emotionally. Ultimately, life success arises not from programmes being implemented in isolation but from a convergence of a combination of interpersonal, instructional, climate and environmental supports, sustained over time (Zins et al. 2004).

What is not known is how much convergence of which dimensions over what period of time, with what levels of consistency are sufficient to produce positive life outcomes. And family and socio-economic factors certainly moderate these relationships. However, what is uniformly recognised by those who study and implement interventions is that social-emotional and character development (SECD) can be strongly influenced by the schools and represents a modifiable risk and protective factor that seems more accessible than socio-economic change at the community level or through affecting a wide swath of parents and families in the community (Torff 2011).

Principles of intervention

Several other conceptual and empirical benchmarks are important in understanding the growth and perspective on social and emotional influences on learning from an American perspective. In an instructive study, Gager and Elias (1997) examined implementation of SEL-related programmes statewide in New Jersey, with particular attention to how the same programmes are in urban disadvantaged vs. more advantaged communities. The question being raised was about implementation and potential limitations of effects. The findings showed clearly that even those programmes best supported by empirical evidence were as likely to be unsuccessfully implemented as well implemented. Indeed, success across difficult socio-environmental contexts depended on the degree of implementation integrity.

We use the term, ‘implementation integrity’, to denote that research has created a rich literature on the conditions needed for SEL and related programmes to achieve their intended outcomes. These conditions often exceed those recommended by programme developers; hence, ‘implementation fidelity’ may actually not be sufficient, particularly in highly challenging school contexts. Table 1 presents a summary of this known literature. As one can see, such factors as continuity and implementation supports are often difficult to address at the level of individual classrooms. Indeed, efforts to successfully enhance students’ SECD are really systems-level interventions. However, because it is essential to systematically build performance character-related skills in students, a determination must be made of

Table 1. Characteristics of successful SEL-related efforts in schools.

Theoretical: contain sound theoretical justification, address risk and protective factors identified in research, and have empirical support of efficacy
Skills based: include strong behavioural, emotional and cognitive components that focus on the acquisition of specific skills and ensure opportunities for practicing those skills in relevant contexts
Thematic: espouse a set of core values, essential life habits, guiding themes or other overarching principles that provide direction for application of skills
Developmental: contain a scope and sequence outlining the expected developmental trajectory of skills and themes and associated supportive processes over multiple years
Coordinated: provide multiple, coordinated interventions in multiple settings to address interrelated goals
Diverse: incorporate cultural sensitivity and cultural norms as appropriate
Sufficient: contain sufficient length and intensity/‘dosage’ to ensure the desired effects and include booster sessions and linkages to other developmentally sequenced approaches when appropriate
Relational: promote the development of positive relationships in classrooms, schools and other settings, as well as between subgroups in the setting
Contextual: Address necessary changes in setting and communities, including changes in formal policies and specific practices, especially around school climate and discipline/ positive recognition systems, and developing resources for positive development and encouragement of student engagement and voice
Continuous: convey and provide for appropriate training for staff and ongoing mentoring and support to ensure effective implementation and sustainability
Ecological: are integrated into the fabric of the setting and are not perceived as an ‘add on’
Evaluable: include ongoing processes to ensure continuous monitoring of implementation, indicators of outcomes, assessment of changing needs and creation of processes for incorporating and assessing improvements

the extent to which it has been possible to create programmes that operationalise best-practice instructional procedures toward the goal of systematically teaching students the CASEL five set of SEL skills. A discussion of a relevant investigation and its outcome follows.

In 2003, CASEL examined 242 nationally available prevention and positive youth development programmes. From these, 80 were found to have systematic information about their content and processes and evaluation results sufficient for more detailed analysis. They were rated on their instructional practices, implementation support structure, link of SEL curriculum and instruction to congruent practices at the school, family and community level, and outcome data, including the degree of rigour of experimental evidence. CASEL (2003) determined that 22 of the programmes were sufficiently high across dimensions to merit being named as 'CASEL SElect Programs'. Introductions to many of these programmes, their primary principles and examples of their practices for immediate use by teachers have been compiled by CASEL (Elias and Arnold 2006). While it might seem that 22 is a relatively small number of programmes, a number of these have significant implementation systems in the USA (e.g. Responsive Classroom, Social Decision Making, Open Circle) and internationally, including the UK (PATHS, Second Step, Lions-Quest).

Thus, to summarise, theory and research on SECD have converged to suggest that this construct is important for understanding children's social functioning and academic success. Much has been learned about the conditions under which SECD can be fostered, and a number of programmes have been developed that have demonstrated the capacity to teach students the CASEL Five skill set. It is also clear that it is likely that only comprehensive SECD efforts can yield schools of character, which create truly empowering settings for students. However, there are some realities in American education that stand in contrast to this relatively good news about SEL and related efforts. Among the most prominent and persistent of these will be addressed next.

Application of SEL to the achievement gap

In American schools, there has been a decades-long achievement gap. It is sometimes defined as a 'black-white' gap, a minority-Caucasian gap and a 'black/Hispanic-Caucasian' gap, but many feel that it is more properly defined as a poverty-related gap, i.e. a gap between students with economic resources and those lacking in those resources. While data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of student achievement in the USA), reveals that the racial achievement gaps have been narrowing since the 1970s, the gaps persist (Perie, Moran, and Lutkus 2005). Looking at this from a wider perspective, one can identify communities in which students are less likely to have adequate test scores and achievement levels and graduation rates, vs. others, and the defining feature is typically the socio-economic resources of those communities (Rothstein 2004).

These gaps are more prominent in, though not exclusive to, urban education but of course are neither inherent features of racial group, cultural group, poverty or urban settings. Rather they are the result of a complex series of interacting factors that Haberman (1991) labelled as 'the pedagogy of poverty'. Education can be seen as what Masterpasqua (1981) has defined as a development right, and as such, a

democratic society is weakened when there are disparities in the delivery of educational services to subgroups within the population. Clearly, students living in high-risk urban environments, particularly those populated largely by ethnic minority groups, are receiving a less adequate education than their more advantaged peers. 5

Kozol (2005) has laid bare the modern application of what Haberman (2004) called the pedagogy of poverty – instruction focused on rote learning, teaching to the test, and rigid adherence to a dry, focused, non-integrative curriculum that is often shorn of such ‘frills’ as art, music and social studies (as well as recess). There is a pervasive disconnect between the human dignity of those in the system, their creative potential, and the reality of the rigid, demeaning rule structures placed on the operation of schools. The system is characterised by a ‘blaming the victim’ mentality, with teachers, parents and students being the regular targets. Hope is in short supply, aspirations are truncated and potential is too rarely seen and encouraged. The stakes – risking low scores on standardised tests – are seen as too high to attempt any extended innovations. We know that these are not the conditions under which children develop a love of learning, nor are they likely to learn materials deeply and in ways they can put to use to bring about better things for the world around them. 10 15

For a nation that appears to pride itself on education, the continued existence of the achievement gap is both an embarrassment and an incongruity. The No Child Left Behind legislation, that heralded a very strict regimen of academic testing and focus on language arts and mathematics, has not led to the expected levels of success (Elias 2009). It is instructive to examine relevant research on why this has taken place and what alternatives might be considered. 20 25

First, in examining the academic achievement gap, it is important to utilise some form of ecological systems theory. While there are various accounts of this theory, we find it useful to refer to three types of nested systems in which individuals are embedded: microsystems, organizational systems and macrosystems (Kloos et al. 2011). Microsystems involve face-to-face and small-group interactions. They are intensive and proximal to individuals and encompass such things as family interaction, classroom interaction, peer groups and after school/extracurricular groups or teams. Microsystems have rules, interaction dynamics, and goal, incentive and maintenance structures that are not defined at the individual level, though they affect all individuals involved. Organizational systems similarly have their own properties, and these are larger units within which microsystems are embedded. These include schools, workplaces, out-of-school programmes, health care organizations, and, some would say, extended families. Macrosystems refer to laws, customs, public attitudes, policies and media influences that create a strong context within which actions are taken at all other levels of the ecological system. A fourth system, the chronosystem, defined as how things do or do not change over time, is also critically important. Needless to say, approaches that only look at the individual student level are bound to have great inaccuracies. Yet, it is just this approach that characterises the pedagogy of poverty. 30 35 40

Research on ecological influences on learning 45

AQ2 ~~Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS 1988/2000),~~ Strayhorn (2010) examined standardised math achievement for black high school students through an ecological lens. He conducted hierarchical linear regression

analyses, in which prior math achievement and individual level differences were controlled for before adding microsystem and organizational system-level variables (represented by family- and school-related factors). Together the effect size for the family- and school-related factors was twice the effect size as the individual factors.

Expanding upon the importance of family-level indicators, Orr (2003) used data from 1979 through 2002 of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), to show that wealth goes above and beyond income. Wealth had a larger effect on children's mathematics achievement than other indicators of SES (e.g. parent education, occupation and income). Additionally, the gap between wealth in white families and black families was larger than the gap in income.

Congruently, the chronosystem for black children appears to be more stable than the chronosystem for white children in ways that may perpetuate achievement gaps. Timberlake (2007) used data from 1976 through 1997 of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to demonstrate that not only were black children more likely to be born into poor neighbourhoods than white children but they were also more likely to remain in a poor neighbourhood as they grew up, even after holding place of birth constant. While this study did not look at academic achievement directly, this means that black students are more likely to spend this academic life in low-income schools as school funding in the USA primarily comes from the local neighbourhood.

A wider picture can be obtained by examining the macrosystem by looking at how the US fares in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests (Elias 2011). It has been well documented that American schools do not perform favourably compared to those in many other developed countries; interestingly, these countries are uniform in having policies and practices that do not embody all of the elements of No Child Left Behind. In fact, clearly implicated in the PISA findings but underappreciated by policy-makers and educational practitioners in the USA is the role of SECD factors as influencing performance in schools across the socio-economic spectrum.

Research on SEL influences on learning

Elias and Haynes (2008), looking at a sample of 282 predominantly black and Latino third graders from a low-performing urban district across six elementary schools, found that social-emotional competence and change in social-emotional competence predicted end-of-year academic grades, after controlling for prior grades. The findings were strongest for black students. Also implicated in the findings was the predictive role of student perceptions of teacher support. The results were found for both reading and math scores, and it is noteworthy that teachers did know that the students' scores would be examined for the purpose of the study. These findings are especially important when considering that the third grade is the end of a critical period for reading acquisition, and that social-emotional factors provided a significant increment in academic performance over and above past academic performance. That is, students who had not been doing well academically showed academic gains when they also had, or improved in, social competence skills.

The most important study showing the role of social-emotional factors in achievement was conducted by Durlak et al. (2011). The researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal SEL programmes involving 270,034 students from kindergarten through high school age. The findings showed that, when compared to controls, SEL programme participants showed enhanced

social–emotional competencies, positive attitudes about themselves, other students and their schools, and improvement in a range of problem behaviours. Most importantly for our current consideration, participation in systematic SEL programmes led to an average of 11-percentile-point gains in academic achievement. Not surprising, these effects were moderated by the extent to which best implementation practices – those fully at odds with the pedagogy of poverty – were applied. 5

There are some caveats and implications from this study. First, the vast majority of interventions were effectively delivered by school staff, which shows the scalability of the SEL approach. Second, the research does not give impetus to whether one should focus on social, cognitive or emotional skill development. Virtually, all effective programmes involve an intentional integration of these elements, as well as behavioural performance, considering their operation as a totality. Thus, no impetus is given to those seeking to streamline SEL programmes. Third, the research did not systematically look at whether parallel attempts were under way in schools to create coherent set of values. Other research summaries (e.g. Berkowitz and Bier 2006) suggest that this is the case and additional relevant research will be discussed shortly. Finally, while it appears that SEL programmes are successful at all educational levels (elementary, middle and high school) and in schools of all socio-economic status, the data are most sparse from high schools and in rural areas. 10 15

If, as noted earlier, SEL programmes reduce barriers to learning by building students' essential learning to learn skills, evidence also exists that creating an overall school climate allowing disadvantaged students to affirm their positive values also has a positive impact on learning and potential for closing the achievement gap. Cohen (2006) looked at the impact of a brief values-affirming intervention on a mixed population of black and white students in a lower-middle class population of seventh graders. The intervention significantly benefited nearly 70% of black students; those performing poorly and moderately equally benefited and both benefited more than the highest performing students, who themselves still showed benefits. Interestingly, corresponding effects were not found for white students. The effects even generalised to grade point average in a course in which the intervention did not occur. Overall, the average performance gap for students who did not receive the intervention was .75 grade points, and the average intervention effect was .30. Thus, the authors point to a 40% reduction in the achievement gap. In a two-year follow up, the black students continued to be positively affected, sustaining their positive gains. Interestingly, an attempt to provide a booster did not show any effects, leading the investigators to conclude that, while a 'values-affirmation intervention closed the achievement gap not only over one school term, but throughout African Americans' tenure in middle school' (402), '[e]ffective psychological interventions depend on the presence of positive and sufficient structural, material, and human resources' (403). 20 25 30 35 40

Implications and future directions

While there is much additional research to be done, it is also clear that many important findings have not been systematically applied within American education. Given the relative strength of the research, particularly as summarised by Durlak et al. (2011) and Berkowitz and Bier (2006), and the wide range of highly applicable SECD-related interventions (Elias and Arnold 2006; www.character.org for the National Schools of Character), one cannot attribute the situation to empirical 45

shortfalls. There is no strong data base for the test and drill approach of No Child Left Behind, for approaches to curriculum and instruction and school climate that are not strongly engaging of students, or for such widespread interventions as after school academic programmes, longer school days, longer school years or supplemental reading programmes. In fact, it is likely that SECD factors play a significant role when such approaches are indeed found to work. SECD is at the foundation of everything that happens in education. Relationships and strong emotions influence learning and it is patterns of interpersonal interaction that determine the effectiveness of classrooms, other school settings, and the school as a whole.

We believe that two fundamental reasons for the reluctance of educators to adopt SECD as a focal emphasis in schools and as the gateway to academic success are unfamiliarity with how SECD efforts look and feel in schools, and the almost complete absence of SECD and school climate considerations from the preparation of future teachers, school support personnel and administrators, as well as school board members. The dissemination of video and richly evocative written examples becomes an important strategy, and it is fortunate that excellent and accessible examples exist (www.edutopia.org; www.CASEL.org; www.character.org; <http://earnedwisdomtech.org/>). These must be shown and discussed in many forums, until a tipping point is created. Our view is that demand will create supply, i.e. that once educators appreciate the value of SECD and school climate approaches, educator preparation programmes will be modified to include greater emphasis on these areas. We will know that a successful transition has taken place when the American education system is more concerned with preparing students for the tests of life, rather than a life of tests.

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