

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning With Games

“It’s Fun and We Learn Things”

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This article has two broad objectives: (a) It reviews the theoretical and practical literature on the use of games to facilitate social and emotional learning (SEL). (b) Based on this review, it argues that games are a powerful way of developing social and emotional learning in young people. In addition, we draw on our collective experience as educational psychologists to identify effective practice when using games to teach SEL. The social and emotional skills needed to play successfully with others are those needed to succeed at work and in adult life. Prosocial skills involve regulating negative emotions, taking turns and sharing, support orientations to others that are fair, just, and respectful. The natural affiliation between children, play, and the desire to have fun with others makes games an ideal vehicle for teaching SEL. Circle Time games are used to support universal programs for teaching SEL to whole classes. Therapeutic board games provide an effective intervention for young people who have been targeted for further guided practice in small group settings. Verbatim quotations from students and teachers demonstrate ways in which SEL has generalized to real-life situations. The role of facilitator is crucial to the success of this approach, both in modeling appropriate skills and making the learning connections for students. In this article, facilitation and debriefing are deconstructed and the value of collaborative, rather than competitive, aspects of games highlighted.

Keywords: *Circle Time; cooperative games; debriefing; emotional literacy; experience-based learning; facilitation; fun; games-based learning; pedagogy; resilience; school connectedness; social and emotional learning; therapeutic board games; well-being*

The report to UNESCO for the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors, 1996) titled, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, described the “four pillars of education”; “learning to live together, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to be.” A few years before Salovey and Mayer (1990), building on

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Gardner's (1983) model of multiple intelligences, began to develop the concept of emotional intelligence. In 1996, Goleman published his best-selling book on emotional intelligence and the connection between self-knowledge, self-management, relationship skills, and success became established internationally. Although much debate still exists about the definition and parameters of social and emotional intelligence, it has sparked a new education focus on "learning to be" and "learning to live together," often referred to as "social and emotional learning" (SEL) or "emotional literacy". This has often been incorporated into a more general focus on "student well-being," developed from our increasing knowledge about the protective factors that enhance resilience and good mental health (Benard, 2004; Blum, 2000).

In 1994, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established at the University of Illinois in Chicago, with a brief to provide evidence and resources to promote SEL. Their aims are to "advance the science of SEL" and to "expand the practice of SEL." CASEL now has an impressive research record influencing education and mental health policies across the United States. In the United Kingdom, the profile of social and emotional learning has risen incrementally over the past decade to the point where all schools, both primary and secondary are expected to follow the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning—known as the SEAL program (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005). In Australia, the concern to reduce bullying and increase student resilience, together with implementing the Framework of Values for Australian Schools has also initiated an interest in social and emotional well-being and learning.

With the growing interest in SEL comes the need to identify programs and practices that effectively engage students. Experience-based learning tools like games provide a forum for the development of the skill-sets, attitudes, and values that build resilience and maintain well-being. This highly motivating approach provides the opportunity for skilled facilitators to create a safe, fun environment, where social connectedness and meaningful participation are likely to occur. This article focuses on games in two different contexts. Circle Time uses games to engage all children within a preventative model to promote positive relations and caring classroom ethos, whereas therapeutic board games target students who need extra guided practice in relationships in a smaller groups setting. We set out the rationale for this approach and the processes for effective implementation.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional understanding and skills underpin both personal resilience and healthy relationships. Howard Gardner (1999) identified the two intelligences as intrapersonal—understanding and managing the self, and interpersonal—establishing and maintaining positive relationships. Although the following list is not exhaustive, the authors identify SEL as including the following:

- recognizing and labelling personal feelings, strengths, and values
- knowing how to regulate and express feelings effectively and safely
- having a prosocial orientation to others, which is not bound by prejudice
- being able to read and take account of the emotional content of situations
- being responsible to oneself and others and making ethical decisions
- being able to set goals in both the short and longer term
- problem-solving skills, especially in the domains of personal coping and interpersonal relationships
- focusing on the positive
- respect for others, including valuing diversity
- treating others with care and compassion
- good communication skills
- knowing how to establish, develop, and maintain healthy relationships that promote connection between individuals and groups
- being able to negotiate fairly
- having skills to deescalate confrontation and manage conflict well
- being prepared to admit mistakes and seek help when needed and
- having personal and professional integrity demonstrated by consistently using relational values and standards to determine conduct

Although these competencies are written here as separate, they are dynamic and overlapping, and always in interaction with specific contexts (Triliva & Poulou, 2006). This makes the teaching of such skills complex and highlights the importance of pedagogy and teacher skills. Social and emotional learning may focus not only on the acquisition of knowledge and skills as in other subject areas, but also in changing or developing values, beliefs, attitudes, and everyday behaviors. As can be seen from the above list, SEL is not just about individual well-being but also about the development of healthy relationships and caring communities. SEL takes root when it is embedded within whole-school practices that support school connectedness and student well-being. The congruence of the values and ethos of a school are critical to embedding such learning across the whole school community (Roffey, 2008).

So why are educators excited about SEL? What do they think it can offer? What does the research say?

Research and Effective Programs for SEL

Indications are that higher levels of SEL or emotional literacy can reduce subjective stress and increase feelings of well-being (Slaski & Cartwright, 2002), improve coping abilities, (Salovey, Beddell, Detwiler, & Mayer, 1999), limit drug and alcohol addiction (Trinidad & Johnson, 2002), mediate aggression (Jagers et al., 2007), enhance psychosocial functioning (McCarty, Atkinson, Tomasino, Goelitz, & Mayrowitz, 1999), increase school connectedness (Whitlock, 2003), reduce bullying (Bear, Manning, & Izzard, 2003), and increase the capacity of students to learn (Zins,

Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). These results reinforce earlier research indicating that children's peer relations in school predict school success (Ladd & Price, 1987). The finding that children's social competence develops in the context of interacting with their peers is especially important as children of primary school age have fewer opportunities out of school for interacting freely with peers and thus developing social competence (Burdette, 2005).

A plethora of information exists about the need for evidence-based SEL programs, multiyear and integrated programs, principal and staff support, community involvement, coordination, and congruence with caring, school practices (Zins & Elias, 2007). Triliva and Poulou's (2006) review of studies on competence-based programs, however, reveal a lack of research on teachers' perceptions or understandings regarding the development or implementation of SEL within school settings. As it is well documented (Alvirez & Weinstein, 1999; Donahue, Weinstein, & Cowan, 2000) that teachers' implicit theories have a significant impact on their approaches to teaching, teachers' attitudes toward implementing SEL in schools become crucial.

The literature focuses on *what* should be taught in some detail but not about the *how* within the classroom. The training of teachers on the PATHS program mentions both principal support and "implementation quality" (Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003), but provides little clarity about what "implementation quality" means. Much of the language in schools remains based in the realm of targets, instruction, and program delivery. Less information exists on pedagogy—the way in which this learning might come about and the teaching approaches that facilitate both knowledge and skills. Zins and Elias (2007) mention just one: "addressing emotional and social dimensions of learning by engaging and interactive methods."

However, research has been conducted on what is involved in "transformative" learning—where education is seen as the vehicle for both personal and social change. This is sometimes referred to as "critical pedagogy" and rejects didactic methods of teaching as technical and instrumental. Fetherston and Kelly (2007) explore a pedagogy for conflict mediation, which is itself a feature of SEL in that it requires self- and relationship exploration and new ways of thinking and doing. They base their thinking around cooperative learning. When students engage with content at the same time as learning/practicing prosocial skills in collaborative ventures, they are employing basic conflict resolution skills to make their learning groups effective. When students are asked to reflect on group processes and skills, they are able to connect them to the course content and then to wider, deeper issues. "Through changes in understanding and perspective, through the reframing of 'problems,' personal and social transformations become possible." P. 264 Fetherston & Kelly (2007) Elias and Weissberg (2000) contend that when SEL activities are coordinated with and integrated into the regular curriculum, they are more likely to have lasting effects. A student who is discussing what a character in a story feels, or what emotion a piece of music or art conveys, is actively developing emotional understanding (Mayer & Cobb, 2000). Reading and discussing stories where the characters have to

confront dilemmas with a wide range of feelings, or having students address emotions through role-plays, can provide them with a repertoire of responses to real-life situations (Norris, 2003).

Fun and Games: Positive Emotions in Learning

I am so happy when we do Circle Time, it is so fun. I can't wait until next Tuesday when we will do Circle Time. (School student)

Playing games and having fun are crucial to development and highly motivating to children. The natural setting of a child's game provides opportunities for language development, hypothesis testing, problem solving, and the formation of thought constructs and "scripts" that reflect the shared cognitive themes related to cultural understanding (Fromberg, 1992; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Vygotsky; 1976). Paramount to a child playing a game is the element of fun. Fun and humor stimulate creativity as the brain moves from a cognitive, rule-bound state to a more fluid, relaxed state where the whole body is engaged in problem solving (Prouty, 2000).

The joy that many students seemed to experience, expressed as having fun, seemed to be tied into the way in which understanding their immediate physical and social context allowed them to make informed decisions. (p. 299, Light, 2002)

Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) emphasize the role of positive emotions in broadening people's capacity to learn. They say that positive emotions enhance optimistic thinking, which leads to more creative problem-solving capacities. Research also demonstrates that positive emotions have the ability "to undo" the effects of stress and encourage both emotional and physical resilience (Fredrickson & Tugade, 2004). Having fun together is a bonding experience and increases the sense of belonging to the group (Ayers et al., 2005). The psychological safety of all is an important element in having fun. The ways in which facilitators respond in a situation have a significant impact on enjoyment.

There were times when students would laugh at what someone had said and we would remind them that there were no put downs in Circle Time and how would they feel if that happened to them. Eventually the students would stop laughing at each other and instead give positive feedback such as "that's a great idea." (University student working in a school)

Games as a Pedagogy for SEL

Until the late 1960s, the dominant paradigm for teaching and learning involved information transfer by experts to learners, using instruction technologies such as books, lectures, and articles, with success measured by written examination. Although

Table 1
Attributes of Traditional and Experience-Based Learning

Traditional Paradigm	Experience-Based learning
Teaching and learning = stimulus and response	Learning mediated by socioemotional and physical environments
Passive, memory-based learning	Active, collaborative, critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, evaluation
Learner watches and listens to “expert” teacher	Learner interacts and collaborates with adults and peers
Learning viewed predominately in the cognitive domain	Learning linked to cognitive, affective, and behavior domains
Learners learn what teachers teach, standardization leads to mediocrity	Diverse learners and environments lead to creativity
Knowledge most often assessed by written examination	Knowledge assessed as it is applied—projects, presentations, multimedia
Predictable, static, and unchallenging = boring	Fun, challenging, relevant, multi-media presentation = engaging
Books, articles, lectures, examinations	Simulations, games, role-plays, case studies, encounter groups, multimedia

these teaching methods are common in some educational settings today, pedagogy has moved on to broader understandings of teaching and learning processes. Cognitive theorists such as Vygotsky (1934/1978), Gardner (1999), and Goleman (1996) discuss social and emotional environment and its impact on learning. Intelligence is now seen as multifaceted, with emotional intelligence a pivotal factor. This diverse view calls for more complex approaches such as those provided by “experience-based learning,” which Ruben (1999) sees as having the potential to address the limitations of traditional paradigms. Experience-based learning is interactive and relational and uses instruction technologies such as simulation, games, role-plays, case studies, scenarios, multimedia presentations, and encounter groups. It is also a pervasive and subtle process, resembling life in many ways. Table 1 sets out what Ruben sees as the limitations of traditional paradigms and the potential for life-long learning skills offered by experience-based practices.

Games-Based Learning and SEL

Games, as a form of cooperative, experience-based learning, appear to be highly motivating to young people. Games have set rules agreed by players that govern the process. Game designers can create effective tools to teach a myriad of lessons, from mathematics to money management, from reading texts to reading people. By keeping a balance between chance, skill, strategy, hope, competition, and fun, they engage the attention of young people. Every face-to-face game, no matter the objective, provides a “social experiment” in which players must use self-regulation and social

skill to play successfully with others. The complexity of games played by young children varies from turn-taking games, such as tag, to more complex games where players require a fair degree of social and cognitive sophistication to play (Connolly, Doyle, & Reznick, 1988). It is the interactional nature of games that makes them especially suitable for delivering SEL. Games designed for this purpose use strategies such as discussion, role-play, and problem solving to engage players in solving social dilemmas whilst practicing social and emotional skills. Players balance personal goals with those of others while managing emotional reactions to frustration and delaying gratification in order to play collaboratively and cooperatively. After repeated interactions in such games, young people become familiar with each other and can then interact in other, more complex ways. At least one influential educational theorist (Piaget, 1962) suggests that games have important implications for children's, and especially boys,' social and cognitive development. Piaget also suggests that one of the functions of childhood games is to practice working with rules and self-discipline, which ultimately underpin social order.

“Playground” is a really good game to get people to stop being mean to everyone. It tells you how to deal with problems and is very fun to play. (Student)

Games, psychodrama, role-plays, and simulations have been used in various contexts to develop insight, empathy, prosocial skills, and improved behavior (Dromi & Krampf, 1986; Hromek, 2004; Porter, 1995; Sheridan, Foley, & Radlinski, 1995; Tingstrom, Sterling-Turner, & Wilczynski, 2006). Despite repeated calls for more research on games over the past 50 years, children's games have surprisingly lacked empirical attention from psychologists or educators. However, Malouff and Schutte (1998) field-tested therapeutic games by evaluating the types of therapeutic experiences produced in the games and the extent to which players enjoyed them. The results supported the effectiveness of therapeutic games with children, adolescents, and adults. In a meta-analysis of moral education interventions, Schaeffli, Rest, and Thoma (1985) concluded that programs that involved moral dilemma discussion, psychological development, and ran for a course of 3 to 12 weeks with a skilled facilitator produced significant results.

Games-Based Learning and Resilience

This game helps me to work things out by myself and not go and tell the teacher that is on lunch duty. (Student)

Emotional resilience refers to the internal and external adjustments we make when adapting to adversity and change. Benard (2004) highlights three key features of resilience: supportive communities that foster relationships based on caring and respect; opportunities for young people to gain competence in a range of skills; and

Table 2
Resilience Factors in Children and Opportunities
Provided by Games-Based Learning

Resilience	Games-Based learning
Self-efficacy	Games-based learning provides opportunity to gain skills through modeling, guided practice, role-play
Social skills	Skill-set developed: turn-taking, listening, sharing, negotiating, resolving conflict, apologizing, encouraging
Emotional literacy	Guided practice in identifying emotions in self and others, perspective and empathy
Sense of humor	Games inherently provide fun and humor
Positive attitudes	Solution-focused, positive interactions
Average to above intelligence	Thinking skills: attention, explaining, perseverance, problem solving
Even temperament	Emotional regulation
Work success	Prosocial skill-set: social skills, thinking skills, emotional regulation, perseverance
Talents	Confidence and skills gained through persistence in a safe environment
School: positive early experience, connectedness, academic success	Positive, fun-based, democratic, collaborative
Family: qualities valued by family, warm relationships, connectedness	Skill-set is developed for maintaining positive relationships
Social opportunities: leadership, talent, positive relationships, adventure, fun, humanitarian pursuits, success, coaching responsibility	Positive relationships, fun, confidence, helping skills, values clarification, moral development

the opportunity to contribute and participate. Blum (2000) followed a cohort of children over their lifetimes and identified a range of personal, family, and peer/adult factors that were common in resilient young people. The research emphasizes the importance of creating opportunities for skill development and for involvement in humanitarian activities, adventure, and fun. Table 2 sets out the ways in which games-based learning activities have the potential to increase resilience.

Cooperative and Competitive Learning

The pedagogy for SEL requires an approach that fosters discussion and reflection on experiences, not just reading a text book, or being told what to do, or think by someone in authority (Illeris, 2002). Johnson and Johnson (2004) argue that for children,

To establish and maintain healthy relationships and manage emotions and internalise the pro-social attitudes and values needed to set positive goals, make responsible decisions

and solve problems, they must be members of a cooperative (as opposed to a competitive or individualistic) community, manage conflicts in constructive rather than destructive ways and internalise civic rather than anti-social values. (p. 41)

Small group learning is an essential component of this approach. More than a thousand research studies have documented the many benefits of cooperative learning (Benard, 2004; Marzano, 1998). Researchers have identified that cooperative learning leads to increases in academic outcomes, social skills, empathy, motivation, acceptance of diversity (racial, ethnic, physical), conflict resolution, self-esteem, self-control, positive attitudes toward school, and critical thinking (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2001; Slavin, 1995). Cooperative learning and cooperative group work have also been associated with lower levels of bullying, an increased ability to tolerate different perspectives on the same issue, and increased levels of assertive problem-solving skills (Johnson et al., 2001; Ortega & Lera, 2000).

The “Too Good for Violence” program (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006) uses role-play, collaborative learning games, small group activities, and classroom discussions to effect changes in behavior and knowledge, values, and attitudes. Students are encouraged to apply their learning in different contexts. In a study of 1,000 students, significant improvements were noted in behavior and substantial, although not significant, changes in knowledge, values, and attitudes. Johnson and Johnson (1999) assert that cooperative groups lead to greater efforts to achieve learning. Team games have a long history of promoting social-moral development although what actually happens, as with other SEL, depends on the focus, skills, and attitude of the teacher or facilitator.

There is an argument that competition increases motivation but research indicates that although competing for high grades can increase the academic performance of some students, many young people are less motivated under these conditions (Meese, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006). More relevant to learning is the situation where support and guidance is provided by a teacher or facilitator to someone who has done well or to someone who needs to cope with the emotions in “losing” (Jones, 2004). These are relevant to both resilience and healthy relationships.

The Continuum and Context of Intervention

Historically, social and emotional learning was seen as appropriate, and therefore, only available to those who had experienced crisis or had been identified as having a significant deficit. This took place in the form of individual counseling, group therapy, or social skills training to address the needs of a vulnerable minority. The paradigm is now shifting to include a focus on social and emotional well-being at a universal level within education (DfES, 2005), although there will always be students who benefit from additional support and teaching. Here, we outline interventions at

two ends of the spectrum using games as a pedagogical approach. Circle Time is a universal and inclusive intervention; all students within a class group participate, and the facilitator is usually the class teacher. Therapeutic games are for smaller groups, although these can usefully be a mix of vulnerable young people and their prosocial peers. The facilitator can be a teacher, but is more likely to be effective if he or she is a special-needs support person, school counselor, or psychologist.

Circle Time

Circle Time (also known as Magic Circles, Circle Solutions, and Learning Circles) is a framework for group interaction based on the principles of democracy, inclusion, respect, and safety. These are encapsulated in the three simple rules: You will have your turn to speak, when it is your turn everyone will listen to you; you do not have to say anything if you don't want to, you may "pass"; there are no put-downs, no naming, blaming, or shaming (Roffey, 2006). Circle Time has a focus on the positive and has two symbiotic aims: to create a caring classroom ethos that promotes a sense of belonging, and to provide structured and facilitated opportunities for social and emotional learning. To be effective, Circles need to be a routine part of the school week, not an occasional "fun time" or used exclusively for problem solving. For younger students, Circles take 20 minutes or so, up to 45 minutes for older students. Participants sit in a circle and are mixed up regularly to interact with others outside of their usual social groups. Activities are presented in the form of games and include paired, small group, and whole group activities. These have a focus on the positive and encourage communication on important issues, such as the meaning of trust, what are the qualities of friendship, and how can we as a class group help everyone feel safe and valued. Examples of games are:

1. **Class Web**—where students make a Web using string thrown between them until everyone is holding a section—demonstrating that each person is important to the whole.
2. **Pair Shares**—in which students discuss and agree two things they have in common, such as "We feel happy in school when . . ." This not only focuses on similarities rather than differences between people, but feedback from everyone shows that positive feelings are generated by friendship, engagement, safety, inclusion, and having fun.

Circle Time enables the teacher to talk about the connection between feelings, rights, and responsibilities and can lead to further small-group creative activities that give students agency to address issues affecting them as a class group. When Circles are facilitated in line with the basic principles, students are very enthusiastic. Teachers say it changes the way students relate to each other and that the benefits generalize outside the Circle (Roffey, 2005).

You think about when you have done bad things and want to make up for it. (Year 5 student)

The no put-downs rule has rolled over into every day. (Teacher)

A student admitted to bullying and said he realized it was because he was angry because his parents were splitting up. Other kids went to comfort him and his behavior since has totally changed. (Teacher)

Having the opportunity for this girl to tell her story of being a refugee has made a huge difference to how others have accepted her in the class. (Teacher)

It also benefits teachers in that students learn strategies to resolve conflicts and relational dilemmas themselves without the need for adult intervention.

Therapeutic Board Games

Therapeutic board games are psychoeducational tools used to teach skills and strategies for dealing with issues such as friendships, teasing, anger management, sportsmanship, anxiety, depression, and happiness (Hromek, 2005). They are played with small groups of children targeted for guided practice and usually include a competent peer with prosocial skills to help come up with positive solutions. SEL is embedded on the board-faces or in the cards that are turned over during the games. The social dilemmas and challenges presented provide opportunities for behavior rehearsal, collaboration, and self-reflection. Each game becomes an “experiment,” allowing the child to make comparative observations, try new strategies, and watch the “experiments” of others from within the safety of a game. When played with a skilled facilitator, they provide a safe, fun, way of coaching young people in prosocial skill development and emotional regulation (Hromek, 2007).

The reason I like this game is that when I have a fight with my friends this game makes me feel better and tells me how to say sorry or them to say sorry to me . . . I think it is a good game because it is so much fun. (Student)

Learning appears to take place at several levels during a therapeutic board game. First, the psychoeducational or *skill-element* level, where players practice the social and emotional skills embedded in the game, for example, saying something funny in response to a tease. Second, the *interactional* level, where these skills are used with each other during the game, for example, when players become frustrated with each other and use self-calming strategies. Third, the *mediated* level, where facilitators enhance learning with strategies such as modeling, scripts, or hinting at solutions. The role of the facilitator is pivotal to the success of the intervention. Although primarily designed for use at the targeted level, these games can be used both to support SEL in the classroom and also as a clinical intervention with individuals who have not responded to small-group work. At this clinical level, playing games must be part of a broader response to meet the needs of the young person.

Facilitation and Debriefing

The role of facilitation in the delivery of games-based learning is crucial to providing a motivating, and safe learning environment and is arguably the most important part of the intervention (Crookall, 1995). This is especially so with games designed to enhance SEL. To this end, facilitators must present activities in an engaging manner, with “flair and panache” and with the safety of players foremost (Jones, 1999). It is the facilitator’s role to create emotionally secure environments, where aims and objectives are clear, rules are applied fairly, and where trust issues are explored. According to Jones, effective facilitators set the scene and “sit back” in a curious, philosophical manner, waiting for the “teachable moments” that present in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, explained later) to scaffold learning. Mistakes are welcomed as opportunities for growth through problem solving and debriefing. Debriefing provides the opportunity for players to make connections between experiences gained from playing and real-life situations.

Although games-based learning has definite benefits, players and facilitators face potential risks. Klabbers (2006) uses the metaphor of the *magic circle* in which players create a real situation and feelings within the game from which they can learn about themselves and the field being explored in the game. Jones (2004) makes the point that emotions in games are often themselves feared, and that teachers may not want to “lose control” by allowing a situation in which emotions come to the surface. This means that some of the most powerful learning, for both individuals and groups, is lost. With the right approach, facilitators use debriefing as a powerful learning tool in the face of emotional crises. Understanding the players and their individual characteristics, developmental stages and their varying capacities to participate, reflect, and draw conclusions is crucial for facilitators who wish to enhance the learning experience. It is also helpful for facilitators to be aware of the types of situations that may cause stress in games, for example when players give personal opinions, disclose feelings, provide anecdotes, or are put on the “spot” (Hill & Lance, 2002). By remaining alert and responding immediately to possible issues of harm, facilitators provide a break or “out” for participants, avoiding shame or embarrassment.

The experiential learning described here directly addresses rather than sidelines the emotions that are, whether we admit it or not, always present in any learning situation and explores options for both personal and interpersonal responses. By engaging in games for social and emotional learning, teachers as facilitators may learn skills that enable them to more effectively address the emotions in the classroom, thereby both embedding social and emotional learning throughout the school day and harnessing a major factor in student motivation. Facilitators encourage collaboration, cooperation, and perseverance amongst the players while modeling expectations.

At first, when the children would not listen, the teacher would intervene and shout at them, defeating the whole purpose of Circle Time. When she fully understood the principles she changed her approach and then we saw some real changes in the students. (University student working in a school)

Table 3
Facilitator Skills Across the Continuum of Social and Emotional Learning

Facilitator Issue	Circle Time as a Universal Activity for all Students	Therapeutic Board Games for Targeted groups
Belief	Relational values and social and emotional skills important for all	Board games support reflection on behavior and coping skills
Attitude	Respectful, curious, neutral, supportive, philosophical stance reduces stress and creates environments in which young people can try new skills and solve problems	
Immediacy	Activities are related to what is needed in the class group with a focus on the positive	Teachable moments arise within a game and between the players
Language	Inclusive language that is nonjudgmental, encourages children to take responsibility for their actions and develop empathy for others	
Making connections	A major role for the facilitator is commentary on the learning that is taking place, such as pointing out commonalities, shared feelings	
Scripts	Encouragement to devise ways and words to facilitate a friendly and caring ethos	Scripts are modeled for dealing with anger, frustration, and conflict
Modeling	Facilitators model courtesy, rule-keeping, turn-taking, apologizing, resolving conflict, smiling, and having fun	
Participation	The facilitator participates fully and leads games to show what is expected. Full participation maximizes the sense of belonging and equality in the class group	
Reading and language skills	Circle Time activities are not usually dependent on literacy skills, but students with language difficulties may need to be placed with supportive peers and given visual support	Poor readers may need assistance with written material. Some concepts will need to be discussed to enhance understanding
Cheating	Cheating is less likely in collaborative games and within a Circle, behaviors are more observable	A curious, philosophical attitude allows the group to decide how to respond
Winning and losing	Competition only takes place between groups to engender a spirit of cooperation. Acknowledgement of the strengths and efforts of others—including opposing teams is part of this. Both celebration and condolence are encouraged	Winning is not the object and is not emphasized. The emphasis is on having fun. Children may, however, be interested in who finishes first or has most tokens. Acknowledge feelings that arise while using “scripts” that suggest coping
Managing difficult behavior	The philosophy of Circle Time is summed up in the three rules that provide for democracy, safety, and respect. When these are broken by individuals they are first repeated to the whole group. If disruption	Rules such as turn taking, listening to others, and respect are negotiated at the beginning. If the game becomes unruly, the facilitator stops play and asks what needs to happen in order to play. Players are invited back to

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Facilitator Issue	Circle Time as a Universal Activity for all Students	Therapeutic Board Games for Targeted groups
	continues, students are given choices to stay or leave. The focus is on inclusive practices so they may return when they wish to abide by the rules	try again. Reduce the size of the group, invite players with pro-social skills. Most players are keen to play and will cooperate
Minimizing harm	A focus on the positive and use of the third person reduces capacity for harm. Peer pressure and repeating the rules usually stops hurtful behavior. If this continues, it may be actively addressed in the Circle with a focus on feelings. Students are discouraged from inappropriate disclosure but issues followed up	The design of the game should not disadvantage any player. Discuss issues of trust at the beginning of the game. Address teasing or put downs immediately
Debriefing	Circles finish with a calming activity that may summarize the learning that has taken place. Role-play games need to ensure that students return to their own identity when the game is over	Discuss issues that arise immediately and if necessary at the end of the game. Use a life space interview if the situation warrants
Incentives	Circle Time is a different way of being in the class and interacting with both peers and the teacher. When the facilitator ensures that this is positive experience for everyone this in itself is highly motivating. Teachers say that students love Circle Time and are always keen	Young children enjoy receiving something as simple as a sticker at the end of the game. This adds to fun and motivation and ameliorates the pain of not finishing first. Older children usually find the games intrinsically motivating

Orientations and Approaches

Facilitators come from a wide range of backgrounds, including psychologists and educators and will often be working with children who have difficulty regulating emotion and lack empathy for their peers. A particular set of values, skills, and attitudes are required as set out in Table 3.

The Zone of Proximal Development

Studies in the fields of primate cognition and artificial intelligence draw on the theories of Lev Vygotsky about the mind. Vygotsky (1934/1978, 1925/1979, 1934/1986) argued that cognitive development takes place within a dynamic interplay of socio-historic environments and biophysical factors. He saw the mind as being constructed from the outside, through interactions with this life-space, and language developing initially for social contact and control and later as *egocentric speech*, which, in turn

directs thinking. Language is the primary tool for mediating between the elementary mental functions (perception, attention, memory) and the higher skills (consciousness, meaning, intentionality), that is, between “*stimulus and response*.” Language scripts create helpful “mind schema” that mediate between thoughts, feelings, and behavior, thus regulating human social behavior (Corsaro 1985; Snow, 1989). This process of internalization occurs within the ZPD surrounding child and challenge.

According to Vygotsky (1934/1978), the ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or on collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

In this zone, facilitators mediate experience by scaffolding words and resources around the child and challenge. Scripts, hints, encouragements, explanations, models, role-plays are examples of strategies that influence the development of thought concepts and behaviors and assist the process of integration into a framework of internal meaning. A repertoire of sample behaviors and scripts develops from which to choose future responses to challenges. Rather than simply being told what to do to solve the problem, the child develops higher mental functions while endeavoring to do so. For example, the simple question “Who wants to go first?” creates the opportunity to earn valuable experience resolving this dilemma rather than being told who will go first. Each child is likely to want the first turn. Group members will be tackling issues of fairness and self-interest in an emotional milieu while deciding who goes first. They will be making decisions about whether to cooperate with the majority solution or to “make a fuss” and protest their rights, prolonging the conflict, and delaying the game. This opportunity would have been missed if the facilitator simply chose who would go first.

The Life Space Interview as a Debriefing Tool

The Life Space Interview (LSI) is a verbal technique for working with students in emotional crisis and is useful when dealing with issues that sometimes arise while playing SEL games. The LSI was initially developed by Fritz Redl (1966) and has been refined by Wood and Long (1991), and Watson (1992). The LSI provides emotional support while using events surrounding a crisis to expand understanding of behavior and the responses of others. Emotional first aid (Hromek, 2007) is applied when the young person is experiencing “floods” of emotion. Once calm, the young person is assisted with the process of decoding the feelings behind actions, identifying central issues, and discovering values such as respect, fairness, and justice. They are then guided through the problem-solving process to choose alternative behaviors and take steps to repair and maintain relationships. LSIs are immediate, meaningful, solution-focused interviews that encourage empathy and provide emotional space for restitution. LSIs can be used as brief interventions during a game or as a private, in-depth interview afterwards. The steps of a LSI are as follows:

1. **Emotional first aid**—use reflective listening to identify and empathize with emotion, encourage use of emotional first-aid strategies, such as having a drink of water, taking a walk, breathing evenly.
2. **Focus on the incident**—once emotional control has been gained, talk, listen, reflect, in order to understand the facts surrounding the incident.
3. **Identify the values** being defended by the young person. Decide on therapeutic goals, for example, anger management, assertive communication.
4. **Problem solving and restitution**—brainstorm alternatives, evaluate consequences, explore restitution, make a plan.
5. **Plan for success**—rehearse the plan, anticipate reactions of others, and accept consequences.
6. **Reenter the game/event**—with a calm, responsible, matter of fact attitude.

Conclusion

The power of using games to teach socioemotional skills lies in the interactional nature of playing a game together. Games are fun to children and young people and therefore highly motivating. They provide the potential for transformative learning through social interaction, social connectedness, cooperation and collaboration, and possess many of the features that encourage student well-being and resilience. While in the ZPD, the skills and language of positive relationships are shaped and guided in meaningful ways. Clearly, a vital role exists for the facilitator to enhance the learning that is taking place within a game, both at the skill-based level and at the interactional level and to provide opportunities to extend and embed this in the formal and informal curriculum and the myriad of interactions that occur in every day school life. In this article, we have presented theoretical and practical evidence to support using this highly motivating approach to teaching SEL. Based on our experience as psychologists and educators, we believe the range of experiences provided by Circle Time, and therapeutic board games provide powerful tools to enhance SEL in children and young people.

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