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Utilizing the Framework of Life Skills Development to Promote Social–Emotional Learning in Elementary Physical Education

SAMANTHA WINN, MICHELLE GRENIER  AND TARKINGTON NEWMAN 

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring skills to recognize and manage emotions, interact positively with others, and make responsible decisions (Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) outlines five SEL competencies, which include *self-awareness* for understanding personal emotions, *self-management* for effectively managing thoughts and emotions, *responsible decision making* to make positive choices, *relationship skills*, and *social awareness* for empathizing with others. Similarly, SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators (2014), identified five standards for what students should know and be able to do as a result of their participation in physical education (PE). In particular, Standards 4 and 5 identify personal responsibility and positive social interactions as primary goals for the standards. Thus, within PE settings, the curricular content and instructional practices of PE teachers are designed to foster the development of SEL competencies as a key component of the PE experience (Graham et al., 2013).

Life skills are similarly related to SEL competencies. Life skills are understood as a diverse array of skills that can be applied to a

variety of life domains that enable individuals to manage the life challenges. Youth sport scholars have suggested that SEL competencies are considered a subcomponent of life skills (e.g., Newman, 2020) as practicing SEL competencies is a life skill in itself. More specifically, life skills are regarded as actions that “can be behavioral (e.g., communicating effectively), cognitive (e.g., making effective decisions), interpersonal (e.g., working with people you do not necessarily like), or intrapersonal (e.g., being self-aware) [and] enable youth to succeed in the different environments in which they live” (Camiré et al., 2012, p. 243). Thus, to be considered a life skill, the skill must be taught, practiced and learned within sport and then transferred for application outside the sporting arena (Pierce et al., 2017). Life skills include, but are not limited to, a student taking deep breaths when feeling upset or stressed (emotional regulation), encouraging a classmate during a challenging activity (communication), working with a peer to tie their shoelace (teamwork), helping the teacher pick up materials after an activity without being asked (social responsibility), and coming to the aid of another student who is being bullied because of their racial background (social justice). The ability to develop and transfer life skills is viewed as a critical process of positive youth development through sport, which “highlights the need to consider how youth develop continuously through constant interactions with environmental systems (e.g., sociopolitical history, culture), external assets (e.g., coaches, parents), and internal pre-dispositions (e.g., individuals’ contribution to their own development)” (Newman et al., 2020, p. 398).

Samantha Winn is a physical education teacher in Physical Education Department at Main St. School, Exeter, NH. Michelle Grenier (Michelle.grenier@unh.edu) is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH. Tarkington Newman is an assistant professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.



Life skill development frameworks have been primarily researched within youth sport contexts, such as community-based sport programs (e.g., Bean et al., 2018; Newman, 2020) and interscholastic team sports (Camiré, 2014; Turgeon et al., 2019). Despite the recognized differences between youth sport and PE, the application of life skills within PE settings has similar underpinning philosophies of personal responsibility and relationship skills (Dyson et al., 2021; Jacobs & Wright, 2018). Though the focus of PE is to promote physical activity for a lifetime by fostering a positive social climate, the integration of life skills can enhance students' capacity to apply SEL competencies.

PE teachers, like youth sport coaches, have the ability – and responsibility – to teach students not only the physical skills needed for participation in sport and physical activity but also the critical

SEL competencies and life skills needed for healthy participation in physical activity (Newman et al., 2016, 2021). All too often, physical education is viewed simply from the lens of physical skill development. However, PE offers a unique environment that can afford teachers the opportunity for students to development positive peer relationships and healthy attitudes toward physical activity. We believe that sport offers an opportunity for teachers and coaches to teach real-world, practical content for students by guiding them in learning experiences that afford personal growth and the development of positive citizenship.

PE teachers who have implemented SEL have witnessed positive changes in their students, such as increased academic success and increased positive social behaviors (Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018; see Table 1). The strong connections between SEL competencies and

Table 1.
CASEL SEL Framework

| SEL Competency: | Components of Each Competency |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Self-awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating personal and social identities Identifying personal, cultural and linguistic assets Identifying one's emotions Demonstrating honesty and integrity Linking feelings, values and thoughts Examining prejudices and biases Experiencing self-efficacy Having a growth mindset Developing interests and a sense of purpose |
| Self-management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing one's emotions Identifying and using stress management strategies Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation Setting personal and collective goals Using planning and organizational skills Showing the courage to take initiative Demonstrating personal and collective agency |
| Social awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking others' perspectives Recognizing strengths in others Demonstrating empathy and compassion Showing concern for the feelings of others Understanding and expressing gratitude Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones Recognizing situational demands and opportunities Understanding the influences of organizations/systems on behavior |
| Relationship skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicating effectively Developing positive relationships Demonstrating cultural competency Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem solving Resolving conflicts constructively Resisting negative social pressure Showing leadership in groups Seeking or offering support and help when needed Standing up for the rights of others |
| Responsible decision making | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness Identifying solutions for personal and social problems Learning to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, facts Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one's actions Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school Reflecting on one's role to promote personal, family and community well-being Evaluating personal, interpersonal, community and institutional impacts |

Note. Data from CASEL (2020).



life skills lend themselves to learning beyond the classroom. However, unlike youth sport, there are currently few empirically supported models to guide the practices of PE teachers promoting the development and transfer of life skills. In this article, we describe practical approaches that PE teachers can use to embed SEL competencies and life skills in the PE setting.

The Implicit/Explicit Continuum. Recently, Bean and colleagues (2018) developed the *implicit and explicit continuum of life skills development and transfer*, which described six levels for teaching life skills in youth sport (see Table 2). The authors stressed that coaches must explicitly “target the development and transfer of life skills” rather than assuming that life skills will be developed naturally (Bean et al., 2018, p. 457). In other words, life skills must be *intentionally* taught for students to acquire them. For example, within a PE setting, teachers using implicit approaches should develop a positive classroom climate by calling students by name and creating engaging, enjoyable, safe activities for the class. When using explicit strategies, teachers can foster the transfer of skills by creating opportunities to practice and discuss the significance of life skills. The utility of this model can be a powerful tool for teachers as they consider how to design and facilitate PE experiences while maximizing learning opportunities to help youth learn life skills.

Ultimately, providing tangible opportunities for students to learn and practice life skills may be critical to internalizing SEL competencies. Level 1 (i.e., *structuring the sport context*) and

level 2 (i.e., *facilitating a positive climate*) of the life skills continuum are implicit and focus on creating a safe environment, acting warm and caring, and clearly stating expectations. The first two levels are designed to set the stage for the development of life skills in participants (Bean et al., 2018). Conversely, levels 3 through 6 are explicit and include *discussing life skills*, *practicing life skills*, *discussing transfer*, and *practicing transfer*. Similar to the development and transfer of life skills, Gagnon (2016) posited that discussing and demonstrating SEL competencies and then allowing students time to practice SEL competencies promote the transfer learning. Ultimately, the life skills continuum serves as a useful guide for physical educators to assess and evaluate their own implicit approaches and explicit strategies for teaching SEL competencies and life skills.

It is worth noting that teachers can be positioned anywhere on the continuum based on their attitudes, behaviors and personal philosophy (Bean et al., 2018). One teacher might focus on the more implicit aspects of the continuum such as setting the rules of the activity, and another teacher may embed the use of SEL competencies and life skills into the lesson. For example, a PE teacher might demonstrate how to kick and trap a soccer ball, explaining the skill progression, but may neglect the opportunity to apply the use of SEL competencies and life skills. Alternatively, another teacher might teach the skills of kicking and trapping while promoting SEL competencies and life skills when instructing the students by saying:



If you notice a classmate successfully traps the soccer ball, you can cheer them on and say “nice job!” If you notice a classmate is having trouble trapping the soccer ball, you can go over and try to help them get better.

This example illustrates how a PE teacher can embed SEL competencies and life skills by discussing and modeling teamwork and positive communication, while providing students an opportunity to actively practice life skills within the PE activity.

Applying the Life Skills Continuum to Teach SEL Competencies

In this section, we offer teaching strategies that promote the development and transfer of SEL competencies and life skills. We use the life skills continuum (Bean et al., 2018) to align the SEL competencies as outlined by CASEL’s SEL framework (CASEL, 2020) to provide examples of actions and language that can be embedded in a PE lesson plan for each of the six levels of the continuum. Please note that the four levels that provide explicit strategies have been collapsed into two steps to provide fluidity in teaching.

Table 3 lays out the clear routines and expectations for PE class so that students understand what is expected of them right off the bat. Stating the expectations and the positive or negative consequences correlated with those expectations allows students to practice responsible decision making. If they know that if they are safe with their bodies and equipment they get to participate, they are more likely to make the responsible decision to be safe.

Table 4 provides examples of strategies to create a positive climate. Note how each of these strategies uses very specific, positive language. Stating clear expectations, providing choice, ownership, and modeling positive behaviors and language are key strategies in

Table 2.
The Implicit/Explicit Continuum of Life Skills Development and Transfer

| Implicit/Explicit | Step of the Continuum | Components of each Step |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Implicit (reactive) | Structuring the sport context | Recognize the inherent demands of sport Design the program Set rules |
| Implicit (reactive) | Facilitating a positive climate | Model positive behaviors Foster positive relationships Support efficacy and mattering Take advantage of naturally occurring teaching moments |
| Beginning of explicit (proactive) | Discussing life skills | Define life skills Talk about life skills and their importance Enhance confidence for life skills development Enable reflection on life skills tasks |
| Explicit (proactive) | Practicing life skills | Intentionally create opportunities to practice life skills in sport Enable reflection on life skills application in sport |
| Explicit (proactive) | Discussing transfer | Talk about transfer and its importance Increase awareness of transfer opportunities Enhance confidence for transfer Enable reflection on transfer talks |
| Explicit (proactive) | Practicing transfer | Forge links with parents, teachers, and community members Provide opportunities to apply life skills beyond sport Enable reflection of life skills application beyond sport |

Table 4.
Step 2 of the Life Skills Continuum With Relevant SEL Competencies and Strategies for Implementation

Level 2 of the Life Skills Continuum: *Facilitating a Positive Climate*

Relevant SEL Competencies: *Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision Making, Relationship Skills*

Strategies to implement in the classroom:

- **Create a positive climate in the gymnasium:**
 - Smile, use a warm tone and teach with enthusiasm
 - Engage in conversation with the students to make connections and build trust
 - Learn students' names and call them by name
 - Have a physically safe learning environment free of damaged equipment or obstacles
 - Have an emotionally safe learning environment where students are treated with respect by the teacher and their peers
 - Teach and model kindness, respect and manners
 - Use positive reinforcement
 - Be imaginative and allow for creativity and choice
- **Model and use common, intentional language including the phrases:**
 - "This is a great choice."
 - "That is not a choice" instead of "don't do that."
 - "This is expected behavior."
 - "This is unexpected behavior."
 - Instead of "touch your toes," say, "reach as far down as you can go."
 - Model what students can say instead of "I can't." They can say, "I can't yet" or "I need more practice."
 - Explain how student's actions affect others
 - "When you call out while I am teaching, it makes it hard for me to teach and for your classmates to learn."
 - "When you cheered on Johnny, it made him feel happy and confident."
 - "When you threw that too hard, it hurt Sally."
- **Use positive reinforcement by using specific language cues:**
 - "Thank you, John, for sitting up tall, listening to my words, and raising your hand and waiting to be called on. Because you were being a respectful listener, you get to be a tagger!"
 - "Wow, I really like how Jane is helping Suzy. It is so nice to help others, Jane, you are being a very nice friend. When you help someone, it makes them feel happy."
 - "John, you are doing a nice job practicing your skipping. Can you show the class your skipping?" "Round of applause for John!"
 - If someone else shouts "I can skip too!" You can say, "Please let John have his moment. He did a wonderful job skipping! Right now, we are celebrating John!"
 - "When you use a safe body, it helps me trust you."
- **Provide choice to students by using the following language options:**
 - "You can choose a softer, squishier playground ball or a harder basketball."
 - "You can choose a bean bag or a whiffle ball."
 - "You can choose to jump rope or do jumping jacks."
 - "Your choice is to follow the directions or take a break."
 - "Your choice is to be kind or take a break."
 - "You can choose the tall hoop or the shorter hoop."
 - "Would you like to use a safe body, or would you like to take a break?"

Table 3.
Step 1 of the Life Skills Continuum With Relevant SEL Competencies and Strategies for Implementation

Level 1 of the Life Skills Continuum: *Structuring the Context*

Relevant SEL Competencies: *Responsible Decision Making*

Strategies to incorporate in the classroom:

- **Create routines**
 - Make sure students know exactly where to go when entering the gymnasium.
- **Have clear expectations**
 - Remind students at the beginning of class of your expectations. Examples of language used by the teacher may include the use of the four B's at the beginning of every class: be kind, be safe, be respectful and be your best.
 - "I expect you to slow down at the white line and stop at the black line."
 - "I expect you to stay on your feet."
 - "If you choose to do these things, you get to participate in the PE activities."
 - "If you choose not to do these things, I will have to ask you to take a break because it is unsafe."
 - "When I say go, please skip."

Table 5.
Steps 3 and 4 of the Life Skills Continuum With Relevant SEL Competencies and Strategies for Implementation

Levels 3 and 4 of the Life Skills Continuum: *Discussing Life Skills and Practicing Life skills*

Relevant SEL Competencies: *Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision Making, Relationship Skills*

Strategies to implement in the classroom:

- **Teach students how to identify their emotions to promote self-awareness and self-management**
 - Zones of regulation—some schools adopt this framework to help students regulate their emotions and identify signs of emotions in themselves and others (Kuypers, 2011). Oftentimes, teachers will have a visual of the zones to assist students in locating where they fall within the zones.
 - “I notice you are in the red zone because it looks like your body is being unsafe and your face is very red. Are you feeling angry and upset?”
 - “I notice you have tears; you seem to be in the blue zone. Are you feeling sad and frustrated?”
 - “You are smiling and using a safe body, you look like you are in the green zone. Are you feeling happy?”
- **Teach students how to cope with emotions**
 - Breathing
 - “Take a flower breath (inhale an invisible flower), now blow out the bubbles (blow invisible bubbles).”
 - Participating in physical activity
 - “Exercising makes your body and brain feel happy. When you exercise and play games, you forget why you were scared/nervous/mad because your brain sends happy chemicals to your body!”
 - “Right now, your job is to participate in the activity. You can tell your feelings that you see them but that you need to come back later so you can do your job.”
 - “I felt angry this morning because my dog ran away, which made me late to school. But my job is to be a teacher, so I had to ask my anger to step aside for a while so that I could do my job.”
 - Taking a break
 - “Sometimes people need to take a break so they can relax their body and brains. I take breaks sometimes so that I can notice how I am feeling and what I need to do to be my best.”
 - Always check in with a student who is taking a break. Debrief the situation of why they took a break in a calm voice with language the student understands. This is not a time to scold the student but rather a learning opportunity. Invite them back in when you and the student agree they are ready to be their best.
- **Model and provide practice opportunities on finding a partner or make a group as this promotes relationship building and problem solving**
 - Be inclusive
 - “Just because someone looks, sounds, learns or likes different things than you doesn’t mean they can’t be your partner! Anyone can be your friend or your partner! Being different is what makes us awesome!”
 - “We have a lot more things in common than we do differently. I like pizza, you like pizza. I like to play tag; you like to play tag. ...”
 - “Say yes with a smile when someone asks you to be their partner or play with them, it makes them feel happy, and you, too.”
- **Model and teach proper manners/social etiquette because this promotes relationship skills and respect for others**
 - Say please and thank you when appropriate
 - Use a calm voice when speaking to others
 - Raise your hand when you have something to share
 - Apologize when you have hurt someone else
 - Say “I accept your apology” when someone apologizes to you instead of “it’s okay.”
 - “When someone helps you, you should say thank you.”
- **Model and teach perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline and goal setting**
 - Say “I can’t yet” or “I need more practice.”
 - Engage in new, challenging activities
 - “This is new, so it might be challenging. But it is always good to give new things a try.”
 - “You are not born knowing how to do everything. You have to learn and practice. Were you born knowing how to tie your shoes? Were you born knowing how to walk? No, you had to practice!”
 - Teach nontraditional activities if possible, such as skateboarding, dance, team building etc.
- **Model proper sportsmanship because this promotes teamwork, communication, impulse control, respect for others, perspective-taking and reflecting**
 - “When you win, you can say ‘good game’ and high five or shake hands with your teammates and opponents.”
 - “When you do not win, you can say ‘good game’ and high five or shake hands with your teammates and opponents.”
 - “It is okay to feel excited when you win or sad when you do not win, but it is not okay to fight, yell, boast or brag.”

building a positive climate, which ultimately leads to the development of SEL competencies.

Table 5 combines teaching practices for discussing life skills and opportunities for practicing life skills. Note the specific language with sportsmanship when the teacher says “when you do not win” rather than “when you lost” or “the losers.” Saying “I accept your apology” rather than “it’s okay” teaches the student that what they did was not okay but an apology can be accepted. It also shows the student who is being apologized to the respect they deserve. Draw on experiences from your own life to demonstrate that you understand how they are feeling. Providing imaginative, developmentally appropriate strategies for students to express themselves and manage their emotions is a key SEL strategy.

Table 6 highlights the strategies of discussing transfer and practicing transfer. The section includes strategies to discuss transfer in the PE setting as well as opportunities for students to practice the transfer of the skills they have learned.

Conclusion

SEL competencies and life skills are complementary learning objectives that provide concrete skills that can help students thrive outside of the school setting and in the future. Utilizing the implicit and explicit life skills continuum in PE settings provides teachers with a practical framework when designing lesson plans and facilitating activities. By building a rapport and establishing a connection with students, PE teachers can easily and efficiently embed life skills and SEL competencies into their lessons by intentionally using specific strategies noted in the tables of this article. Oftentimes, we are fortunate enough to have these children for several years and see them in multiple contexts, which may lead to further integration and understanding of their ability to transfer the valuable lessons and skills learned in the PE setting to other life domains. Through the use of this life skills framework, we encourage teachers to continue to examine whether their teaching contributes to lifelong education.

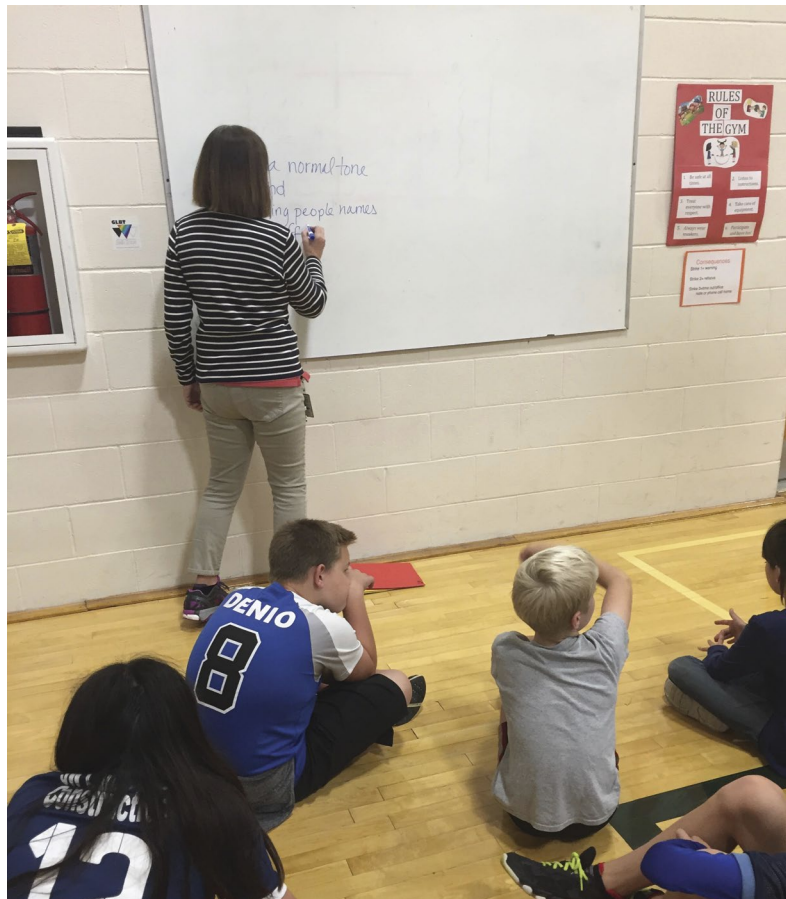
Table 6. Steps 5 and 6 of the Life Skills Continuum With Relevant SEL Competencies and Strategies for Implementation

Levels 5 and 6 of the Life Skills Continuum: *Discussing Transfer and Practicing Transfer*

Relevant SEL Competencies: *Self Awareness, Social Awareness, Self-Management, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision Making*

Strategies to implement in the classroom:

- **Discuss how selecting partners can be used outside of PE – at recess, at camp, for school projects, etc.**
 - You will have to work with other people your entire life and it is important to have good communication and problem-solving skills and to respect others and appreciate diversity.
- **Discuss how to use coping skills outside of PE**
 - Give real-world examples that are relatable for students. Give examples from your own life to show relatability and build trust.
 - Discuss times in students’ lives that they may experience different emotions and have them identify situations and how to manage the emotions.
- **Discuss perseverance, goal setting, self-discipline and decision making with personal stories (examples from teaching observations):**
 - “When I was in kindergarten, I didn’t know how to read. So, I had to do extra work with my teacher, which made me feel nervous and embarrassed. I learned that I just needed more practice. So, I had to practice reading every single day, and then by first grade, I was able to read a book! It was very challenging, but with practice and help, I was able to get better!”
 - “I didn’t learn how to ride a bike until I was 19 years old because I had never practiced or been taught. I was embarrassed as a kid for not knowing, but when I was 19, I decided to challenge myself. It was not easy; I got frustrated and upset at times. But I asked my anger to walk away for a few minutes, I took a deep breath, and I kept practicing. I spent all day practicing and now I can ride a bike! I still have to practice a lot because I am not PERFECT at it YET. But that is okay. I am proud of myself for learning and trying something new and challenging!”
- **Discussing and practicing personal responsibility and decision making**
 - Sneaker Rule: “The sneaker rule is for you to practice being responsible. If you know you have PE, you have to make the decision to put your sneakers on in the morning, put them in your backpack at night, or leave a pair in your cubby. Because when you make the decision to have your sneakers for PE it is a responsible choice because then you can participate in PE. Having your sneakers in PE keeps you safe and keeps the gym floor clean. Being prepared with sneakers in PE is a responsible decision and will help you learn the importance of being prepared for other things.”
- **Allow students the opportunity to practice these skills and identify situations that they may need to use them**
 - Ask about their weekend, for example, and allow students to share stories of when they used a certain life skill and what types of strategies they used.
- **Create a community space for students to practice transference of life skills**
 - Cross-country team
 - Practice teamwork, positive social interaction, goal setting, leadership
 - Establish a school fundraiser 5K
 - Teamwork, leadership, goal setting, care for others, social interaction
 - Field day: Have older grade levels run the field day for lower grade levels. This is a great way to practice leadership, communication and care for others.



ORCID

Michelle Grenier  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7661-3765>
 Tarkington Newman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6932-1932>

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