



Beyond Reforming to Transforming

By [Linda Lantieri, RYI](#)

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More and more of us throughout the world are realizing how important it is to go beyond reforming education today and are beginning to talk about educational transformation. Educational transformation is what young people need from their schooling to be fully prepared to meet the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. A US poll of registered voters released by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (www.21stcenturyskills.org) in 2007 reported that 66% felt that students needed a broader range of skills than just the basics of reading, writing and math. 80% said that the skills that students need today to be prepared for the jobs of the 21st century are very different from what was needed 20 years ago. How can schools prepare young people to live healthy, engaged lives as active citizens in a democracy which honors diversity and helps young people have all of the skills they require to tackle the tough questions of life with deep meaning and purpose?

The field of Social and Emotional Learning or SEL as it is called, is leading the way in terms of shining a light on the kind of schooling that is essential for young people to have future success in life as well as work. We have known for a long time now that when young people are exposed to social and emotional skills in the context of a caring school environment, the results are astounding. Not only do young people do better on standardized achievement tests but their pro-social behavior improves and they are far less likely to engage in anti-social behavior.

Many of us who have been building the field of social and emotional learning are now also encouraged by another piece of the puzzle that may be just what will help us embrace this wider vision of education. This missing piece is the burgeoning field of

“contemplative education” which has its roots in the fields of neuroscience, psychology and the world’s wisdom traditions. Many educators are experimenting with integrating SEL with contemplative based educational practices in school settings. When both teachers and students are exposed to approaches that quiet the mind and calm the body, this combination seems to provide a fertile ground for social and emotional learning to be more deeply rooted and take hold.

Brain science tells us that a child’s brain goes through major growth that does not end until the mid-twenties. Neuroplasticity, as scientists call it, means that the sculpting of the brain’s circuitry during this period of growth depends to a great degree on a child’s daily experiences. Environmental influences on brain development are particularly powerful in shaping a child’s social and emotional neural circuits. Yet we also know from the neuroscience research that the brain needs to be in an emotionally regulated place in order to focus, pay attention, and make clear decisions. Young people who learn how to calm down when they are upset, for instance, seem to develop greater strength in the brain’s circuits for managing distress (Goleman 2008).

In New York City classrooms and elsewhere, teachers and young people are being equipped with the skills to be more self-aware and regulate their emotions more effectively. There is beginning evidence that regular practice of these contemplative skills strengthens the brain circuits that underlie emotional regulation. The benefits of such a regular practice may include (Lantieri 2008, 10):

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- The ability to deal with stressful situations more effectively by creating a more relaxed way of responding to stressors
- Greater control over one’s thoughts, with less domination by unwelcome thoughts
- Greater opportunity for deeper communication and understanding between adults and children, because thoughts and feelings are being shared on a regular basis

By offering children systematic practice in techniques that help them pay attention and relax their bodies, we can help them cultivate their budding capacities and facilitate the development of their neural pathways. Teaching these practices to students can increase not only their social and emotional skills, but their resilience: the capacity to not only cope, but thrive in the face of adversity. And this is true of teachers as well. Teachers need to first have opportunities to build their own reservoir of inner resilience if we want them to be more skillful in bringing these skills into the classroom.

When we pay enough attention to growing and cultivating our own self-awareness and management of emotions first, we find that it often puts us in a place where teaching and learning becomes more relaxed and teachers start to become the instruments of their own expression of teaching.

Combining the fields of SEL and contemplative education requires that we hold such a vision of what is possible in the midst of the paradox of what the reality is right now in the field of education. It is believing we can make the impossible possible and the exception the norm. We are not alone in this vision and we need to keep up each other's hope and faith that we can transform education by transforming ourselves and our children. We can "be the change we wish to see in the world" as Gandhi reminds us.

References: Lantieri, L. (2008). *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques for Cultivating Inner Strength in Children*. Boulder: Sounds True.

Linda Lantieri has been in the field of education for over 40 years as a classroom teacher, director of a middle school in East Harlem, NY and co-founder of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. Currently she is the Director of the Inner Resilience Program in New York City and is a Senior Program Advisor for the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. She has been on the board for Reclaiming Youth International for over a decade. Her most recent book Building Emotional Intelligence – Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children (Sounds True, 2008) has already been translated into seven languages.

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