

A Pedagogy for Helping Students Get Along Better Inside and Outside of School

By Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., Director of Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab



We are worried about our kids. We are seeing less civility, more cynicism, and great disconnect from public institutions. It would almost be a good sign if we saw more conflict, but that does not seem to be happening. Instead, we are seeing more hopeless resignation.

This is not a recipe for a good future, for our young people or for our society.

During what we call STAT – Students Taking Action Together – classrooms engage in social action pedagogy, which combines a service-learning framework with an empirically validated social problem-solving intervention and problem-based learning. STAT is specifically tailored to help middle school students engage in feasible and personally meaningful social action planning and, where appropriate, social action within the existing social studies/history/civics/current events curriculum. STAT lessons use the PLAN social action process:

1. creating a problem description (P), which defines the issue being discussed,
2. brainstorming a list of options (L) to solve the problem,
3. developing and acting on an action plan to solve the problem (A), and
4. noticing successes as part of ongoing evaluation and refinement (N).

Students' solutions can become small-scale projects that are refined by a feedback loop among students, teachers, and administrators. The STAT feedback process creates a social justice-oriented school climate with empathy, by demonstrating that students' suggestions (even if not enacted, i.e., such as an alternative way an historic event might have been handled) have been heard by others and seriously considered and that many points of view have been expressed and explained. Students' STAT conversations and suggestions give school personnel unique access to student concerns in a way that can deepen their understanding of the students they serve and reinforce students' social action and sense of empowerment and contribution.

The ability of STAT to integrate into existing structures is its key asset. This integration takes place in two ways. The overarching framework is the intention to teach students how to analyze social issues and formulate action plans to address them. The integration occurs either via issues that are historic or issues current to the school or wider social context.

STAT Background and Pedagogy

STAT is the product of seven years of piloting of student social action discussions in the Life, College and Career Advisory program (New Brunswick Middle School) and MOSAIC (Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character, in six middle schools in Jersey City). Implementing schools have been recognized with Promising Practices and School of Character awards and have found their participation has led to improvements in student behavior and academics. The lessons are designed to expose students to a series of pedagogic elements over multiple years, each of which is designed to help students get along better with one another, including and especially those with whom they might disagree or whose opinions and ideas they don't know. Instructional elements include, in addition to PLAN: (a) Responsible Listening, (b) Respectful Empathic Debate, (c) Peer Opinion Sharing, (e) Collaborative Creativity,

(f) Audience-Focused Communication, and (g) Reflective Improvement. Key to the approach is for students to create products they have to prepare, deliver, and defend collaboratively. These might be social action improvements in their classrooms or schools, or they might be alternative solutions to historical problems or proposed solutions to current events. They will get feedback on what they create and will learn to modify in light of feedback.

In essence, what we are doing is providing a systematic and SEL-informed pedagogical framework for what typically is a content-focus in schools. It is a model for bringing a pedagogy to social studies instruction that emphasizes youth voice and empowerment, empathic listening, communication skills, and constructive and creative problem solving around historical, current events, and school problem issues. It aligns with existing content and creates a social-emotional and character development process that builds students' civic competencies and deepens students' academic understanding. The fundamental habits for respectful, engaged dialogue and democratic action are those envisioned by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education*.

Examples in Action

By using a common problem solving strategy as an analytic tool, students begin to internalize that way of thinking and apply it to other issues they encounter, both in school subject areas, problems in school, and issues in their lives. The pedagogy also gives teachers a tool to use when difficult issues happen in the school or community and it's not quite clear how to discuss them. STAT also provides an excellent vehicle for teachers to collaborate with school support staff, such as school psychologists, counselors, and social workers, who have experience in guiding students in discussions of challenging issues.

Example #1: Social studies class; Topic: The Civil War

Consider the problem from different perspectives, using the PLAN framework:

P: How did the North and the South define the problem in the country? What were the issues, from each

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perspective? Who were the key people involved in making important decisions?

L: What options did they consider to be acceptable ways to resolve the problem? What did they ultimately decide?

A: How did they carry out that plan? What obstacles did they encounter?

N: How did it work out? What can be learned from their experience that are relevant to the present? NOTE: This is where the project connection can emerge and connects to Audience-Focused Communication pedagogy, below.

This simplified example can be refined, differentiated, and nuanced in alignment with curriculum content at any given grade level. Regardless, these pedagogies can be linked into the instructional process:

Responsible Listening – having to summarize the positions one just heard

Respectful Empathic Debate – asking students to argue from the perspective of all sides of an issue, especially ones they disagree with

Collaborative Creativity – how else could the problem have been viewed? What other solutions might have been considered?

Audience-Focused

Communication – how can students share what they have learned with others? Do a mock Civil War newspaper? Conduct

an interview? Use maps to illustrate other option? Identify a current analogue to the historical situation studied?

Reflective Improvement – reflection on what was learned from taking this kind of look at a historical situation

It should not be difficult to see this same pedagogy used for discussing current events, such as immigration and gun violence, where widely varying perspectives are held.

Example #2: Cheating in the school (or other school-related problem)

The PLAN process can be used to allow students to develop positions and propose actions to resolve an issue in the school in real time, as it emerges. This is the best approximation to democracy-in-action, since decisions have to be made, many inputs considered, and not everyone's suggestions will be enacted. However, the process will allow for broad input, as well as reflection on the action and an orientation to monitor for continuous improvement. Here is a partial example:

P: What was the problem that those who cheated were trying to solve? What were the issues, from their perspective? What were the issues from the perspective of teachers and administrators?

L: What options did they consider to be acceptable ways to resolve the problem? What did they ultimately decide? How did they arrive at the decision that cheating was acceptable?

A: How did they carry out that plan? What obstacles did they encounter?

N: How did it work out? What consequences did they not consider that they should have? How would their action have been wrong even if they were not caught? What can be learned from their experience that are relevant to the present?

Bring STAT to Your School

Thanks to funding from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, the Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning Lab is bringing STAT to middle schools

throughout New Jersey. While materials and web-based resources will be ready in August 2018, there are opportunities to pilot existing STAT materials in the 2017-18 academic year. If you are interested, please email us at secdlab@gmail.com. All we would ask is for you to provide us with some feedback about the materials you use.

Summary

STAT is an instructional approach that helps students to take different perspectives, hear those they do not agree with, and work with peers with empathy, good communication skills, and problem solving to consider creative and constructive ways to address historical, current events, and current classroom or school-related issues. It is designed to fit in social studies/history/civics/current events instruction in middle school and in so doing, promote social-emotional and character development and deepen academic learning.

About the Author



Maurice J. Elias is Professor, Psychology Department, Rutgers University and Director, Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab (www.secdlab.org) and the Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools (SELinSchools.org). He received the Ernest L. Boyer Outstanding Educator Award in 2015. Books include *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*, *The Educator's Guide to Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement: Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom*, *Talking Treasure: Stories to Help Build Emotional Intelligence and Resilience in Young Children* (www.researchpress.com), *Schools of Social-Emotional Competence and Character* (www.nprinc.com), *The Other Side of the Report Card* (how schools and districts can integrate SECD systematically into their ongoing student report cards - Corwin), *Urban Dreams: Stories of Hope, Character, and Resilience*, *The Joys and Oys of Parenting* (Behrman House), and *Boost Emotional Intelligence in Students: 30 Flexible, Research-Based Activities to Build EQ Skills* (published by Free Spirit Press). He writes a blog on Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) at www.edutopia.org.