

# **Taking Explicit Social and Emotional Development to Academic Instruction: Lessons Learned from Year 1 of Education and Innovation Research Grant (EIR Grant)**

By: Nick Yoder, PhD, Susan M. Green, EdD, Dawn Kulpa, Kara Burnett, Sasha Breeden, Miriam Blanc-Gonnet, Rosa Turco, PhD



Each time an educator enters a room of learners—whether with a group of first graders, undergraduate students, fellow educators, or for one-on-one coaching with teachers and leaders—their goal is to harness the collective social, emotional, and academic experiences to achieve their overall objectives. Educators want to intentionally make social, emotional, and academic connections for several reasons, such as:

- It allows us to keep the humanness of teaching and learning front and center—the student, the educator, and those supporting educators.
- It provides time for social connection, belonging, and learning support.
- It acknowledges the need for students to engage emotionally, making the content relevant, interesting, and meaningful to them.
- It facilitates the neurobiological connections in the brain that support social, emotional, and academic experiences.
- It creates harmonious, safe, and supportive environments where all students are motivated to learn.

To foster social, emotional, and academic connections for both students and educators in classrooms, curriculum providers must provide a range of experiences for educators that support their own development of social, emotional, and academic competencies and capacities that the educators can then implement in classroom settings.

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Grant, we set out to implement an initiative in five schools across two districts—New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) and San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD)—during the 2023-2024 academic year. We aimed to embed explicit social and emotional skill instruction, using the Harmony Curriculum, into their academic curriculum.

### **Social, emotional, and academic \_\_\_\_\_**

**One of the important learnings is to help differentiate what we are speaking about—the experiences of youth, learning, development, competencies, needs, well-being, and behaviors. Oftentimes, we put social and emotional in front of all of them and assume we mean the same thing.**

### **Problem to Solve**

Across the country, educators are implementing SEL through explicit skill instruction or some form of integrative practice. However, there remains a lack of clarity about what SEL-academic integration truly looks like, and many educators report insufficient time to fully implement SEL during the school day. This raises the question: How can SEL curriculum providers help educators seamlessly integrate SEL into their daily schedules, given the numerous demands on their time? Achieving this requires collaboration among students, educators, school and district leaders, Harmony Curriculum personnel, and researchers, all working together as co-learners.

## Strategies Tried

Our initial approach at Harmony Academy was to partner with district and school leaders and educators to co-construct solutions that worked for them to begin to embed the Harmony Curriculum within their teaching and learning time. To do this, we tried a variety of strategies across nine hours of professional learning throughout the academic year, delivered through a blend of in-person and virtual sessions. Core strategies tried include:

- Provide opportunities for educators to unpack more of the social and emotional knowledge, skills, and mindsets within the Harmony Curriculum and its Units, Lessons, and Activities. Often, educators do not have time to do deep dives into the “what” or “how” of social and emotional skills.
- Center professional learning and support for good teaching and learning. To engage in good pedagogical practices—e.g., youth-centered problem-solving, power of language, classroom discussions, and cooperative learning—students and adults need a variety of social and emotional competencies. We embedded Harmony practices within good pedagogy.
- Offer educators the chance to experience adapted Harmony lessons with a focus on academic content. As part of this experience, Harmony adapted many lessons within the Curriculum to be more aligned with academic skills, for instance, by aligning to skills like characterization, writing, speaking, and listening. We further provided subject-specific tools that allowed educators to go deeper across all subjects.
- Focus on shifting educator mindsets and attitudes. We did this by providing multiple opportunities for educators to personally set goals, reflect, write, and discuss topics to deepen their thinking and think about how this work influenced their own lives—professionally and personally. We also wanted to honor and celebrate their accomplishments.

## Lessons Learned

Through engagement with the five schools across the two districts, we learned multiple lessons to support educators in integrating social, emotional, and academic learning into their classrooms. We took these learnings and are applying them in our second year of work with thirteen schools across the two districts:

- 1. Become a part of the community.** Harmony Academy has partnered with each district for at least five years. Thus, educators are knowledgeable about the Harmony Curriculum and incorporate elements of it into their teaching. However, that doesn’t mean it has become a part of the school community—yet. When engaging with school communities to provide deeper professional learning and data support, it’s essential first to establish trust, relevance, and meaningful connections within that community. Intentional time must be taken prior to and during the time together to build deeper relationships, show your added value, and make connections.

As we enter our second year of the project, we are taking multiple steps to build relationships prior to and during the year to form relationships with the school community, including (a) additional pre-meetings with school leaders and staff; (b) having a school lead who can co-lead the project in the community; and (c) a closed social media community that allows educators to connect with us and others involved in the project across districts.

- 2. Explicit skill instruction helps provide the language of SEL.** In our classroom observations in the five pilot schools, educators consistently reinforced various social and emotional skills that are also in the Harmony Curriculum, including communication, empathy, and emotion regulation. Further, we know from research that educators use common instructional practices to promote various social and emotional skills, naturally

providing opportunities to integrate SEL within academics. Unfortunately, without explicit instruction, this approach does not systematically provide students with the needed social and emotional skills or the consistent language of social and emotional skills.

In the project's second year, we aim to provide educators more time to dive into the social and emotional skills covered by the Harmony Curriculum. In other words, the benefit of explicit skill instruction, even with SEL-academic integration, is for everyone within the school community to have some level of consistent language and strategies for SEL across the school and as students graduate to new grades. We plan to provide educators more time to dig into their own understanding of how the skills help them to better (a) understand their purpose, (b) learn how to teach the skills, and (c) integrate and reinforce the skills within the academic context.

**3. Educators need support in the “how.”** Within the educator surveys and focus groups, they found it important to identify ways to make SEL a part of academic subjects and not separate while at the same time providing a space for students to decompress and process what is happening in their day. For example, they saw that Harmony was a tool that could help students become receptive to instruction while at the same time being a part of the overarching culture.

One of the reasons that educators found Harmony helpful is because they could turn around some of what they learned in professional learning the next day. In the second year, we are enhancing this by being very intentional about how we are modeling adapted example lessons—both by adapting Harmony lessons to integrate academics and by adapting academic lessons to integrate Harmony. As we model these lessons in the sessions, we first do a think-aloud about the

planning decisions, then do a lesson together, and then we support them in thinking about how they could start the planning process.

**4. Educators want to see it in action.** In both the educator and student focus groups, participants expressed that they liked Harmony overall, and it provided fun, short activities. However, both groups still expressed concerns about how effective it was in solving problems that occurred in classrooms (e.g., bullying) or if relationships always improved within classrooms. To us, this implies the importance of really seeing the Curriculum and integration in action to showcase the ease of use so that educators consistently implement the program. Additionally, it underscores the importance of continued reinforcement conversations around core concepts found within Harmony. For instance, disagreements and problems are a common part of relationships; what matters are the skills and strategies used to resolve them to maintain meaningful connections.

In the second year, we wanted to intentionally offer opportunities for educators to see and students to experience a model SEL-academic integration lesson within the school setting. As such, Harmony is working with schools to model an adapted Harmony lesson. For instance, when teaching about conflict resolution types through Harmony's Animals of Conflict, we use storybooks to have students identify how different characters use conflict resolution approaches and the result of those conflict resolution approaches. Further, in the winter semester, we will allow educators to practice implementing an SEL-academic integration lesson and receive feedback from Harmony and their peers.



**5. Connect SEL-Academic Integration to their current concerns.**

In the student focus groups across the five schools, participants noted several social interactions that appeared to disrupt the learning and social harmony within classrooms. The interactions that educators may not always be fully aware of or recognize, particularly in terms of how much students pay attention to these social dynamics.. Conversely, educators may not recognize the degree to which proactively and consistently using Harmony could help address those concerns by students.

We are providing educators with more opportunities to connect Harmony to their current instructional practices and classroom concerns. In other words, we want educators to identify Personal Harmony Goals for why they are engaging in the sessions and identify their own problem of practice that they want to help solve throughout the sessions. We further provide micro-learnings (quick learnings, reflective questions, and videos) in between sessions to reinforce key concepts.

Harmony Academy is looking forward to continuing to collaborate with and learn alongside students, teachers, and researchers on how best to create a common language of SEL using the Harmony Curriculum and continue to use the program as a tool to build relationships, engage students, and create meaningful learning opportunities for students.

**About the Authors**

**Nick Yoder, PhD** is an Associate Vice President at Harmony Academy at National University. With a career in education spanning over two decades, Dr. Yoder is passionate about supporting the holistic development of students and adults to create harmonious communities.

**Susan M. Green, EdD** is the Senior Citywide Administrator for Social Emotional Learning for New York City Public School. She is committed to cultivating classroom and school cultures where

both students’ social and academic needs drive all decision-making relative to social development programming, curriculum & content design, extra curricular activities, community-based partnerships, and parent engagement.

**Dawn Kulpa** is the Executive Director for Social, Emotional, and Academic Development for San Antonio Independent School District. Her work is dedicated to leading initiatives that center students and equity, elevate student voice, and build positive classroom and campus cultures that foster community, belonging, and skill-building across all learning dimensions.

**Kara Burnett** is a dedicated elementary educator with over 13 years of experience in New York City and Connecticut, focusing on nurturing students’ social and emotional well-being. She is passionate about creating joyful, memorable learning experiences through engaging lessons and strong personal connections with her young learners.

**Sasha Breeden** is the Grants Specialist at Harmony Academy at National University. With a background in education and the nonprofit sector, she is deeply passionate about empowering both educators and students. She strives to create inclusive spaces where every voice is heard, fostering environments where individuals and communities can truly thrive.

**Miriam Blanc-Gonnet** is the Senior Manager of User Strategy at Harmony Academy at National University. Drawing on her experience as a former elementary educator, Mrs. Blanc-Gonnet is dedicated to enhancing the well-being of both students and educators by developing content that nourishes teachers’ passions and fosters an integrative approach to education for all learners.

**Rosa G. Turco, PhD** is the Research Director at Harmony Academy at National University, leading initiatives to advance social-emotional learning and literacy through evidence-based programs and innovative digital tools. With expertise in early childhood education and a commitment to fostering inclusive environments, Dr. Turco works to translate research into impactful strategies that enhance student outcomes and educator well-being.