

## WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

*“Essential Connection Skills is a practical, specific, inspirational, and must-have resource for any teacher, coach, school leader, or parent who aims for a more empowered and successful student.”*

**Julie O’Connell Alholm**, Instructional Coach  
and EL Teacher, IL

*“Essential Connections, K–6 is a call to action. In this crucial resource for educators, Paonessa and Zwiers identify the greatest challenge facing our schools today—the loss of connection and community—and provide an effective and intuitive framework to address it. By leveraging the power of schools to help students develop meaningful connections (to themselves, to others, to their community, to their own learning, and to other learners), students will develop the skills they need to navigate school and realize the basic promise of education: to be fully engaged as members of an interconnected society. This, very simply, is the right book at the right time.”*

**Doug Bolton**, Educator, Clinical Psychologist, Author of *Untethered: Creating Connected Families, Schools, and Communities to Raise a Resilient Generation*

*“Essential Connection Skills, K–6 is a powerful and insightful guide for educators seeking to transform their classrooms. With a focus on fostering meaningful conversations, this book highlights the profound impact of teaching students how to connect with each other and themselves. By cultivating these essential relationships, teachers can unlock a deeper level of engagement and learning, making this a must-read for anyone dedicated to creating a more inclusive and interactive elementary learning environment and helping students be successful in life outside of the classroom.”*

**Gina Greenwald**, Principal,  
Hoover-Wood Elementary School, Batavia, IL

*“Anne Paonessa and Jeff Zwiers make a compelling case for academic and social-emotional learning to be integrated every day, in every content area, and in every possible way. This must-read book creates a roadmap for building much-needed connections to ensure that SEL is not merely a designated period but an integral daily practice. I urge all K–6 educators to explore this volume, which is rich in practical references and jam-packed with lots of carefully crafted, ready-to-implement lesson ideas.”*

**Andrea Honigsfeld**, Professor, Molloy University, NY

“The goal of *Essential Connection Skills, K–6* is to foster student success. It is a well-crafted resource for all educators and partners. It provides educators with the skills needed to empower their students and give them the tools required to be lifelong learners and critical thinkers.”

**Eileen Matos**, K–3 Bilingual and K–12 EL Educator, IL

“*Essential Connection Skills, K–6* is an invaluable resource for educators navigating the challenges of reintegrating social connections into the learning environment after the pandemic. With practical strategies and real-world examples, this book provides effective ways to foster collaboration, empathy, and community, making instruction more engaging and responsive for students in today’s world.”

**Melissa Payne**, Former Elementary School Principal, IL

“*Essential Connection Skills, K–6* is a must-read for any teacher—whether you’re already focused on social skills or looking to include them more in your teaching. The suggestions in each chapter are practical for novice to veteran teachers.”

**Amber Quirk**, Regional Superintendent,  
DuPage County Regional Office of Education, IL

“This is an inspiring and timely book that reminds us of the power of human connection. It offers practical tools and illustrates how teaching SEL competencies in schools transforms students’ lives, fostering social emotional intelligence, resilience, and empathy.”

**Ellen Swanson**, PhD, Associate Director of Strategic Initiatives,  
CAREI (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement),  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

“*Essential Connection Skills, K–6* is a game changer for new or veteran educators. As technology becomes more present in our classrooms, we are forgetting that early learning is a social endeavor. When students have the confidence and skills necessary to interact with one another in a supportive learning community, academic gains will follow. This book clearly presents the research explaining why connection skills are so important and provides ready-to-use activities, tips, and tricks to build those skills in students.”

**Kevin Skomer**, EdD, Retired Elementary Principal, IL

“This book reminds us of an important truth—when we intentionally teach connection skills, we don’t just improve classroom culture; we prepare students for life. Paonessa and Zwiers offer a roadmap for educators to help students develop social and emotional competencies while excelling academically. *Essential Connection Skills, K–6* equips educators with practical strategies that can be applied across all content areas.”

**Todd Whitaker**, Professor/Educational Consultant,  
University of Missouri



# Essential Connection Skills, K–6



# Essential Connection Skills, K-6

First Edition

Strategies for Integrating Social  
Connections Into Core Content

Anne Paonessa  
Jeff Zwiers

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This world is filled with so many remarkable people- and you must be one of them since you are here reading this book! I hope it inspires some new ideas, sparks conversations, and helps you to create and share meaningful connections!

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# About the Authors

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articles on literacy, conversation, and language development, along with children's books and curriculums.





# Introduction

## Essential Connections Within Instruction

**A**s a district-level administrator/consultant (Anne) and a provider of professional development (Jeff), we understand the pressure that today's teachers are experiencing. Teachers are working hard to address behavioral disruptions, tailor their instruction to accommodate a diverse range of skill levels, help students catch up on missed lessons due to increased absences, and effectively respond to the current English language development levels of their multilingual students. Many districts have adopted web-based adaptive programs for math and literacy. These programs are followed by small-group instruction and independent practice to help bridge students' learning gaps. However, despite these efforts, academic progress can be slow, leaving our teachers feeling overwhelmed as they strive to juggle multiple demands while also teaching grade-level content. This overall sense of pressure often trickles down to our students as well.

With the best of intentions, we have swung the pendulum too far toward singularly focusing on computerized and small-group, teacher-led instruction. While this approach certainly holds value and is necessary in teaching today, we must strive for a balance by incorporating well-planned and purposeful social interactions within our classrooms. It is important to recognize that not all students are motivated solely by earning stickers or advancing in computer-generated lessons. Many students continue to lack the skills and confidence to effectively collaborate with others in social and academic settings. Even though we have returned to in-person instruction, many of our classrooms are missing out on the joy of being together, forming connections, and learning through meaningful interactions with one another!

### **WHAT ARE WE STILL MISSING?**

---

Outside of our schools and classrooms, a general decline has also occurred in spoken conversation, which directly impacts our students. At a restaurant, it is common to see a family

with parents on their phones and children of all ages on either phones or tablets. This phenomenon of being physically present with others but having devices potentially disrupting interactions and conversations is known as *technoference* (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). While some families have successfully managed to limit screen times and set aside time for family conversations, there are countless others who spend less time engaged in speaking with each other. The general decrease in face-to-face interactions often results in students who have difficulty engaging in conversations with their peers and teachers within our classrooms.

During remote or hybrid instruction, students missed out on having social interactions during key developmental stages in school. As a result, many of today's students are lacking in social skills and struggle to initiate and sustain conversations with others, including their peers. The reduced opportunities for socialization have left an impact on many learners. This includes not learning social cues or being able to read body language, or not acquiring both the skills and confidence needed to engage in sustained conversations. The impact from the downturn in communication and in-person social interactions already present before the pandemic became amplified during the sustained periods of isolation and continues to be an issue.

As a result, many of our students have varying levels of social anxiety. According to the National Institutes of Health (Fortuna et al., 2023), about 20 percent of eighty thousand youths surveyed across the globe have experienced increased anxiety. Some students struggle to identify their own emotions after missing out on in-person learning, making emotional regulation more challenging. When asked to cue into their own emotions, many students are lacking in the ability to pick up on and then label their feelings. They also struggle to read the emotions or responses of others, which provides additional obstacles to sustaining positive interactions. With reduced social exposure, some students may find it challenging to recognize and understand the perspectives of others or even to imagine themselves in another person's shoes and feel empathy for them.

Students today not only are limited in engaging in direct conversations but also have reduced experience in navigating group dynamics. This includes developing skills for effective collaboration and managing conflicts by finding common ground, learning how to compromise, or creating a new solution with others. Some of the other symptoms of social anxiety include being worried about being embarrassed in front of others, fear of offending someone, and fear of being judged by others. With our well-intended focus on filling in the academic achievement

gaps through the use of devices and small-group instruction directed by the teacher, we are failing to address important life skills and competencies our students need to build the social capital necessary to be successful in life.

## **IT SOUNDS LIKE WE SHOULD PRIORITIZE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING CLASSES!**

---

Well, not so fast. Let's put it this way, if you had never played tennis before but you had a stand-alone lesson every week where the teacher taught you one tennis skill and then you talked about it as a class or with a partner, do you think you would internalize it and start to "know" tennis? Maybe when you actually had the chance to pick up a racquet and try to hit a ball, you would remember some of what was taught and do somewhat better than you would have without the text-based tennis class. Or maybe there would be a disconnect from what you had heard and discussed in the class and the moment when you actually try to apply that knowledge.

We acknowledge that our tennis analogy has limitations, but research shows that stand-alone social-emotional learning (SEL) classes have limitations in their effectiveness and lasting impact for students (Taylor et al., 2017). Integrating SEL instruction into core classroom instruction has several advantages, including the opportunity for students to apply what they have learned. Through integration within academic content, there is consistency and continuity toward developing core competencies. Modeling of skills by core-content teachers and the intentional and explicit integration of social-emotional skills in meaningful ways also help to create closer student-teacher relationships and helps to create classrooms where all students feel accepted, valued, seen, and heard.

## **BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!**

---

When we started this conversation, we were focusing on the need to help our students achieve better academic outcomes and make up for any academic ground that was lost through interrupted learning. If we do add in these social-emotional skills during our instruction, won't we be losing valuable instructional time? There is only so much time in the school day, and many students are already so far behind. If we take time away from our core instruction to add in lessons on social skills, they will never catch up academically, right? Wait for it . . .

Research shows us that by integrating SEL instruction centered around essential connection skills (ECS) into our core instruction, we can improve our students' academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Please go back and read that last sentence one more time—it's that good! Not only will you be helping your students to develop important life skills and develop key competencies but also time spent building these skills into your core instruction will positively impact their academic learning. By focusing on the development of ECS, you are providing a pathway for equity ensuring that all voices are included, valued, and accepted. This is the power of an integrated learning approach.

When there is a holistic approach to teaching and layering social and emotional skills and competencies within core instruction, it leads to improved student engagement. Students tend to take on more ownership of their learning and better understand the value of what they are learning. It also creates an improved classroom setting where students develop empathy and an understanding of others within a community of learners, which creates a safe place for students to take risks in their learning.

Many of the tasks that students engage in also require higher-order thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration to achieve a shared outcome. All of this requires a deeper interaction with the content, which results in a better understanding and improved retention of the learning standards. For this to happen, students are required to communicate effectively with each other in meaningful ways and to navigate a range of social interactions. They are growing their academic knowledge and understanding while also building their interpersonal skills.

Including this focus within your instruction also helps students to become more aware of their emotions and how they respond to them. Students see how their words and actions impact others, which results in fewer distractions within the learning environment. Students working together, learning academic content while acquiring social and emotional skills, provides an enhanced experience that results in improved academic outcomes and nurtures students' overall well-being. Our students need far more from us than a narrow focus on improving their scores on standardized assessments.

This book is a call to action! It is time that we swing the pendulum back from the majority of the school day being spent on individual and small-group or computerized instruction to including the use of strategies that intentionally have our students working together. While using data is one important

aspect of effective instruction, this needs to be balanced with providing integrated learning opportunities. Our students benefit from time to learn together. Opportunities to practice and strengthen the important skills that will prepare them to be successful across settings and circumstances as they go through life should also be a top priority in our schools.

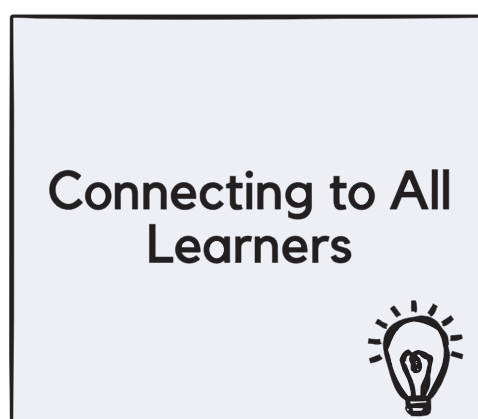
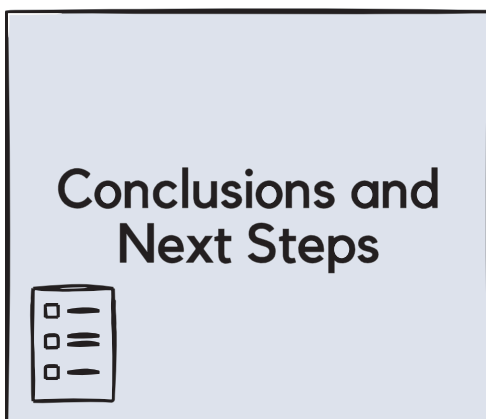
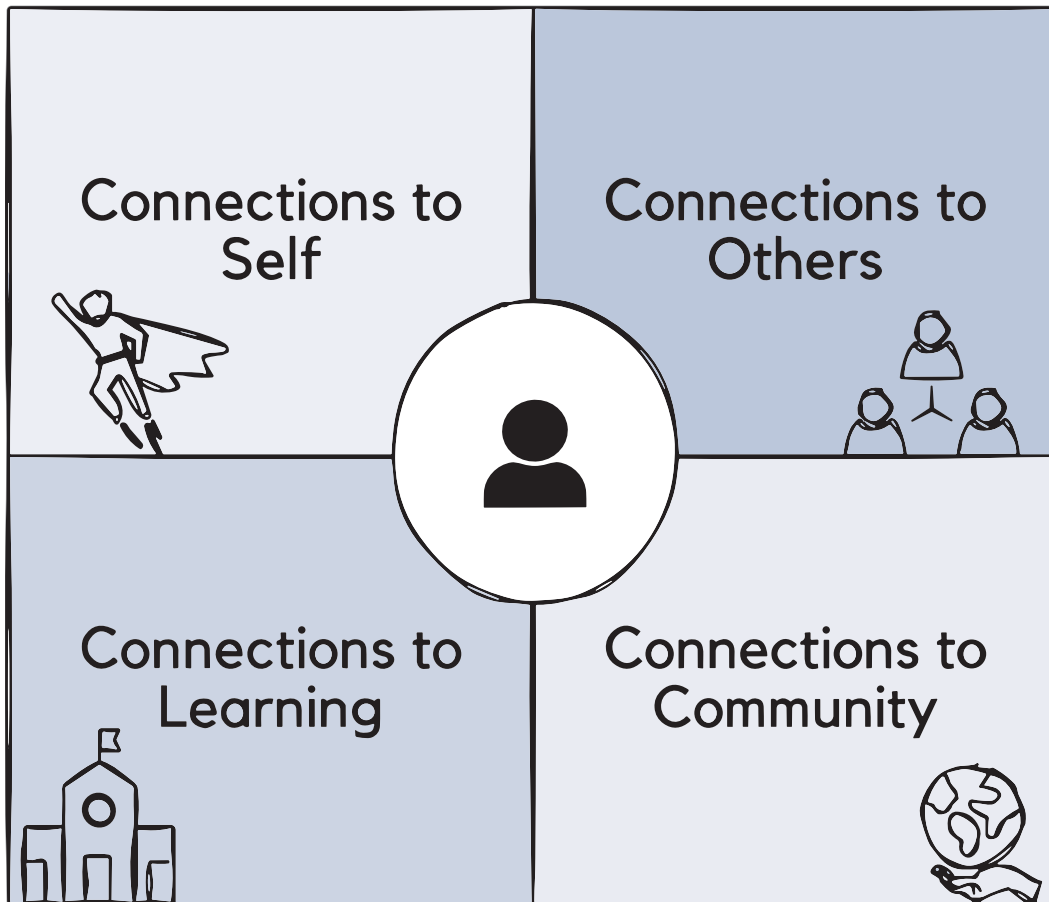
## **I'M READY TO TRY IT, BUT HOW DO I EVEN BEGIN TO GET STARTED?**

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You're in the right place! This book will provide you with an overview of the foundational skills needed by students along with practical strategies to enhance your core instruction. The book is built around four key domains of ECS: connections to self, connections to others, connections to learning, and connections to community. Within each domain, there are four key areas essential for students to develop the skills and competencies necessary for successful connections in that domain.



# Essential Connection Skills



## AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

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The content of this book is focused on supporting teachers of kindergarten through sixth grade in enhancing their instruction through the addition of ECS. A chapter is dedicated to each of the four connection domains. You will find an explanation of those components necessary for a student to be successful within each connection area. It will include the *what*, the *why*, and the all-important *how*. You will also find examples of strategies that teachers have tried with their students and additional methods that you can use to help your students build these connection skills within your content. The goal is to help provide you with the information you need so that you can start to visualize how you can build ECS opportunities within your own instruction. While many of the techniques are to be directly layered into your existing instruction, you will also find some minilessons that will set the foundation for the ECS strategies and promote the development of these important life skills.

Chapter 1, “What Is Our Purpose in Education?,” provides you with information and reflection concerning trends we’re observing in today’s classrooms. Chapter 2, “Connections to Self,” focuses on connections that are needed to help students develop a growth mindset, to see themselves as capable learners, to celebrate their strengths, and to have an appreciation of self that lays the foundation for positive interaction with others. Chapter 3, “Connections to Others,” centers around connections where students have multiple opportunities to become effective communicators and collaborators, all while learning with and from each other, their teachers, and the community. Chapter 4, “Connections to Learning,” highlights connections where students gain competencies that will fuel their interest in learning, increase engagement in content, and help them to take on a larger role in their own education. Chapter 5, “Connections to Community,” involves connections where there is a focus on belonging, inclusivity, and developing agency.

In Chapter 6, “Connecting to All Learners,” you are provided with tools and strategies to make adaptations or use additional strategies to reach a wide range of students, including culturally and linguistically diverse students, those who are shy or hesitant to participate, those who are natural leaders, and those with learning differences. Chapter 7, “Conclusion and Next Steps,” provides information to help you balance your educational approach and better meet the needs of your students and also supplies useful resources. Now let’s get started!





# What Is Our Purpose in Education?



## CHAPTER 1

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***“Educating the mind without  
educating the heart is no  
education at all.”***

**—Aristotle**

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## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION?

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When you think about that question, what is the first answer that comes to your mind? We are guessing that most of you didn't answer, "To help prepare students to get amazing scores on standardized assessments" or "Making sure that students are prepared to do well on any tests that may come their way in the future." We couldn't agree more. However, if you look at how our education system is set up, the vast majority of our time, energy, and focus is spent on just that—helping our students make gains on that next benchmark assessment or standardized test.

While we can all recognize the need for accountability and some measures to ensure that all students are receiving a quality education, we should also be able to see that the ability to do well on these tests will only go so far toward our students' futures. Right now there is more pressure than ever to make those academic gains. This tension to produce better scores is being felt by students, teachers, and administrators. But if you think back to how you answered the question about the purpose of education, or to the reason you decided to go into education in the first place, it most likely goes far beyond scores and extends past academic gains. The vast majority of educators go into the field to make a difference in the lives of their students.

This motivation to become an educator typically centers on the desire to cultivate both the minds and the hearts of students. As John F. Kennedy said back in 1963, "Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future" (Kennedy, 1963). What type of future will we have if we maintain our current path of narrowly focusing most of our time and attention on only the minds of our students? Is that a smart investment in our collective future? Academic test scores are only one factor within education. We are calling for a shift from a test-centric education to an approach that takes into account both the mind and the heart. Our collective purpose includes teaching our students to succeed beyond tests—to provide them with an education that allows them to reach their full human potential. This includes a vast array of skills and competencies that never show up on a test.

Nancy Astor (2018) once stated, "Real education should educate us out of self into something far finer; into a selflessness which links us with all humanity" (p. 75). Education that provides for both the mind and the heart has the potential to help every student have the skills and confidence they need

to successfully navigate their way through life and also to develop the critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and compassion that will empower them to make a difference in the world. In order to create a society where each person is valued for who they are, where everyone has equal rights and opportunities, we need to stop and reflect on the educational experience we are providing. Having solid test scores does not equate to an individual who can communicate effectively, who is open to taking on and valuing the perspectives of others, and who is ready to act on their beliefs.

## WHAT IS INTEGRATED LEARNING?

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The quote at the start of this chapter, which is attributed to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, captures the essence of integrated learning. His words speak to the importance of education in developing an individual's intellectual and physical well-being along with developing their character. It highlights the importance of not only growing one's academic knowledge but also the need to balance this with a holistic education that nurtures the development of ethics, empathy, resilience, and overall well-being. Integrated learning provides intellectual instruction combined with personal development. This approach to education is what is needed to prepare our students to be successful in both school and life.

Learning that is one-dimensional and only addresses the requirement to learn grade-level academic content does not comprehensively give our students what they need. An integrated learning approach works to develop both the mind and the heart, helping students to become well-rounded individuals who are prepared to thrive in an ever-changing world, to make thoughtful decisions, and to communicate effectively for a range of purposes. This level of integration also prepares our students to consider others in the world with acceptance and empathy. It builds the confidence and skills our students will need in order to take action, to become advocates for themselves and others, and to help lead the changes necessary to improve the world around us.

Research shows us that providing integrated learning, which simultaneously addresses both intellectual and personal dimensions of a student's growth, has several advantages. According to Kaspar and Massey (2022), those students who were provided integrated learning had higher levels of academic achievement, greater levels of emotional intelligence (EQ), and better interpersonal skills than their peers who experienced

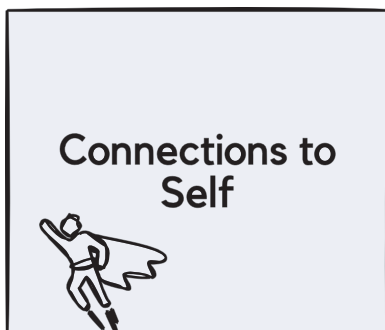
traditional curriculum. This built on the earlier study of Schaps et al. (2001), who also found that those students who were provided integrated learning showed notable gains on standardized achievement tests, had fewer attendance concerns, and exhibited improved behavior in the classroom as compared to control groups.

Additional studies reveal the overall improved outcomes for students when their personal development is layered into content instruction. A study by Shoshani and Steinmetz (2013) showed that students provided with this integrated approach to learning had better academic growth and better interpersonal skills and overall emotional well-being than those peers in a control group. An article by Langreo (2023), specific to integrated learning within math and coding, showed that students with an integrated approach had greater achievement in math content and also developed higher levels of perseverance, self-efficacy, and growth mindset than those who were taught with a more standard approach.

## WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL CONNECTION SKILLS?

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The foundational skills to be integrated into core content instruction in order to educate both the mind and the heart have been grouped into four key domains of essential connection skills (ECS): connections to self, connections to others, connections to learning, and connections to community. Each of the domains includes four key areas for teachers to focus on with their students. Helping students to grow in these skills and competencies will help them to develop ECS in each domain. The strategies provided within each chapter of this book will help you to plan content lessons with integrated learning opportunities. Your students will benefit in so many ways, including increased engagement in academic content, improved academic learning outcomes through opportunities to reflect and set goals, opportunities for collaboration to complete authentic tasks, increased frequency and quality of communication within the classroom, and discovering more relevance in their learning.

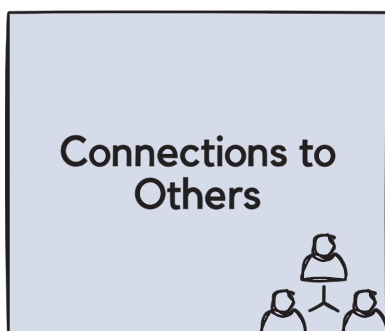


Self-Awareness

Self-Reflection

Resilience

Cultural Competence

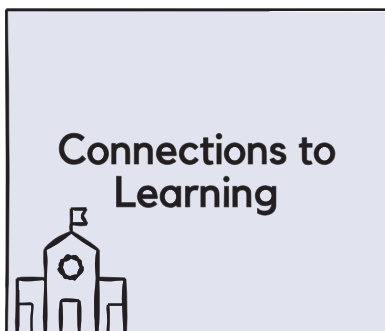


Communication Skills

Teamwork

Problem-Solving

Responsibility



Curiosity and Inquiry

Perseverance

Goal Setting

Relevant Learning



Belonging

Advocacy

Global Community

Social Responsibility

## LET'S TAKE A MOMENT TO TRAVEL BACK IN TIME

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Think back to your own time in school. What are some of your happiest memories? Few of you probably thought back to a time when you got a “Great job!” at the top of a worksheet or when you worked by yourself on a computer program and completed an advanced level. For most of us, those best memories from school center around a favorite teacher who inspired you to try your best, or a special project completed with your friends. Some of us remember being involved in a project that reached into our community and made a positive difference in the lives of others.

One of the memories that comes to mind for me (Anne) took place in junior high. Mrs. Watts shared that she would be placing us into groups to form our own companies. This was a huge departure from the typical round-robin reading of our social studies book followed by note taking, quizzes, and an end-of-unit test. We suddenly found ourselves running our own cookie businesses. We were so focused on the task at hand and excited for the opportunity to work together that we were not aware of the many additional layers of learning and skills being developed through this project. At the time, I did not understand the intentional planning behind the design of the small business project. Looking back, Mrs. Watts clearly wanted us to gain more than a basic understanding of small business. Moving beyond the typical read, discuss, and quiz model helped us to gain real-life skills and competencies.

We were working together with our classmates, negotiating a wide range of decisions including designing and then selecting a logo, scripting a commercial to be broadcast over the intercom, and using math to determine our product costs and how much we would need to charge for our cookies to make a profit. We made the cookies, sold them to other students and teachers at lunch, and then donated our profits to a charity. There was a bit of friendly competition to see which company would be the most profitable. I can easily remember the sense of importance I felt at the time, knowing that we would be generating actual profits that would be donated to a local cause. Not that it matters, but I am pleased to report that Granny Annie's Chunky Chippies took the lead.

What I wasn't aware of at the time were the skills I was developing. During this project we were forced out of our comfort zones with the need to interact with others we typically didn't speak to. I gained insights from those classmates and

learned from their perspectives. We also needed to navigate dividing and assigning tasks and then bringing them back to the full team to complete the project. While quite a few years have passed, I can easily remember having to explain my ideas to the others in our company in different ways until I had clarified and supported my thinking for them. I also remember feeling genuinely excited when someone shared an idea that I would have never thought of to make our approach even better. Initially I was nervous about the idea of speaking over the intercom for everyone to hear, but I felt more comfortable knowing that I would be doing it with others on the team. Once we were done with our live on-air commercial, I found that I had enjoyed it and my confidence grew.

Fast-forward to fifteen years later when I experienced opening an actual small business. I owned and operated a martial arts school for over twelve years. It was such a rewarding and, at times, challenging experience. I had taught first grade, stayed home with my own children, and then decided to stay involved in education in a different form by teaching martial arts. Looking back, I know that the brief experience my teacher provided us in junior high planted the seed that owning and running a business was not out of the realm of possibility. I went from speaking over the intercom to sharing information in several live segments on the Chicago area news. Actually “experiencing” a small business with my classmates had a lasting impact on me, far more than reading a chapter in a textbook. I eventually sold that martial arts school and returned to the traditional classroom, bringing with me several lessons that I learned through my time as a small business owner.

Based on my own experiences and seeing the needs of my students, I taught in a similar way to Mrs. Watts. As a teacher at the elementary and middle school levels, it was always a priority to use integrated learning experiences that would increase engagement, promote the development of social skills, strengthen communication, and be centered around a shared purpose. These strategies were focused on learning academic standards while developing social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, all while having fun! When I think back to other teachers and my overall schooling experience, I have the strongest memories of the integrated learning experiences provided by those special teachers, and I can recall how they made me feel as a learner. The experiences with those teachers were far different than those with teachers who relied only on teaching through a workbook.

During my own research in this area, which included interviewing former students twelve years after I had been their teacher,



the lasting benefits of providing integrated instruction came through loud and clear (Paonessa, 2023). Over a decade after having these opportunities, the students spoke about the motivation they felt and how they remembered putting far more effort into integrated learning projects than they did in other classes that relied solely on traditional instruction. The former students shared that they gained confidence in both their learning and their ability to interact with a wide range of people through the ECS-driven projects. For those students identified as culturally and linguistically diverse learners, these experiences provided meaningful reasons to use English while being focused on completing a task rather than being focused on language demands.

The former students also spoke directly about the learning community we were able to form through getting to know each other better as individuals as we navigated the projects together. Many shared that they felt supported and that they internalized the belief they were capable as learners through successfully navigating work together. Several of the former students that were interviewed also shared that these learning experiences had a direct impact on who they are today. If we pause to think about the experience of today's students, some are missing out on these shared learning experiences that are shown to not only improve their academic outcomes but also help them to grow in ways that will stay with them long after their time with us.

As students in our classrooms now sit and work on their computers and participate in small- or whole-group instruction with the occasional turn-and-talk thrown in, they are missing out on the potential of developing ECS. Many are silently comparing themselves to their peers to try to determine their own ability level. Most of us can easily remember figuring out pretty quickly that you had arrived if you were able to become a part of the Blue Birds reading group. Our students make observations about student groupings and try to figure out where they fit in. Some students are internalizing beliefs that they are “less than” others and are simply “not capable, so why try?” With connected learning, every learner is seen and heard and has something of value to contribute. Students discover their unique strengths and more readily develop a growth mindset.

## VYGOTSKY'S INSIGHTS

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Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was a teacher and psychologist who developed the sociocultural theory of cognitive learning, which highlights the role of social interactions in learning. This theory



asserts that learners continue to construct knowledge and grow their understanding of the world through engaging with others (Vygotsky, 1978). This includes interactions with both peers and teachers, providing individuals with opportunities to negotiate meaning and to give their perspectives through discussions and sharing of ideas. This constructivist viewpoint holds a sharp contrast to students passively receiving information and processing it independently or spending hours throughout their school day on a computer.

Vygotsky's theory asserts that individuals benefit from learning at the next level from knowledgeable others that are beyond their own independent level, or the zone of proximal development. Students construct their learning and understanding through these interactions, which they internalize and make their own, helping their own knowledge base to grow (Vygotsky, 1978). These social learning interactions allow students to build on each other's ideas, help them to fill their gaps in understanding, and provide them with the opportunity to collectively build new knowledge together. All of these active learning interactions help to strengthen student engagement and build a more increased depth of knowledge than does passive or independent content.

As teachers, administrators, researchers, and consultants, we have witnessed students' increased motivation when they have the opportunity to learn with and from each other. According to Braren (2024), as humans, we have evolved with a need for social connection because it has become necessary for our survival. Over time, we have become hardwired to interact with others and to form relationships. Teachers that leverage this drive to interact with others have students who become far more engaged in the learning process. There is also a level of instant accountability knowing that you will be sharing your work or ideas with your peers rather than having them in a Google Doc or web-based program, or written down on a paper that only your teacher will eventually read.

Students enjoy interacting with each other during instruction infused with ECS. While having students turn and talk or share with a partner is a step in the right direction, it is not enough to provide them with the interactions necessary for meaningful conversations or to navigate decisions together through collaborative structures. When teachers intentionally provide these opportunities within their classrooms, students learn at a deeper level and they gain valuable ECS they will use throughout their lives. Turning to share a response with a partner and listening to that partner's ideas adds to instruction, but it does not provide the length or types of interactions needed to learn effective conversation skills. In ECS-integrated instruction,

interactions often require active listening skills, being open to the perspectives of others, and, at times, learning negotiation skills as the individuals interact to move the group's ideas or project forward.

## WHAT DOES A TYPICAL SCHOOL DAY LOOK LIKE NOW?

Teachers are working with students who have a wider range of abilities than ever before, and they are expected to teach grade-level content while simultaneously filling gaps for some and providing extensions for those students who are already secure in the content. We have all observed stressed teachers and administrators working to address the impact of interrupted learning that is a lingering result of the pandemic. Everyone is looking for ways to help our impacted students not only catch up but thrive within their school experience. Everyone is analyzing academic outcome data to determine if we are making the gains needed to be back on track or, preferably, performing even better than before.

Enter adaptive technology. There are technology tools that will assess students' needs in both math and reading, identify where the gaps are, and then provide lessons to help meet their individual needs. With many districts having one-to-one devices, it is not uncommon to see these tools being used across grade levels. While students still have time with their teachers leading instruction, for some students, a good portion of their day is being spent on a device.

A typical day for a student may go something like the daily schedule below.

Morning Meeting	An initial start to the day, typically used to build classroom community and include SEL skills or topics. Students may go around in a circle answering a prompt provided by the teacher or share ideas with their elbow partner.
Literacy Block	The teacher starts with a whole-group lesson or by reading aloud to the class. The teacher then takes a small group to work with her or him at the guided reading table while other students spend time on a laptop interacting with an adaptive technology program, reading on their own and responding in a journal, or traveling through centers until it is their time to work with the teacher in a small group.

Specials Block	The class spends time engaged in art; music; physical education; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); or a stand-alone SEL class. While this provides students with variety and balance in their day, this time is typically structured to meet the teacher's learning objectives.
Lunch/Recess	Students have time to eat their lunch and talk with those around them. Depending on their grade level, they will most likely have recess and will spend time navigating the social gauntlet of the playground.
Math Block	The lesson may launch with a Number Talk where students attempt to answer a math problem on their dry erase boards and then either take turns listening to how their classmates tried to solve the problem or share their method with a neighbor. Back to the computer for time on adaptive math programs to help address skill loss and then structured time with the teacher in a small group.
Science/Social Studies/SEL Class	This time is spent with the teacher sharing information, followed by some independent or small-group work on the content. The subjects might rotate on a unit-by-unit basis or have one day each week dedicated to a stand-alone SEL lesson.

While this is just one sample schedule, it does reflect the typical day in many of today's classrooms. There is, understandably, a heavy data-driven focus to get students "caught up." And there is, of course, much value in using the technology-driven assessment tools that we have available today. The more targeted instruction that we can deliver, the better off we are in responsively meeting students' needs. However, we need to ask ourselves if, by following these models of instruction, we are truly meeting all of our students' needs. And are students growing academically at the rate we had hoped? Are we providing them with a well-rounded education that is setting them up to be successful across *all* areas of life? In many cases, our students are missing out on opportunities to engage in integrated learning with their peers. Even those who are making academic gains may be missing needed practice in developing ECS. We need to ask ourselves what type of memories from school they will have to look back on and what impact today's school experiences will have on their enduring ideas, beliefs, and character traits.

## WE NEED EQUITY OF THE MIND AND HEART!

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With the best of intentions, many school systems have shifted to an instructional approach that relies on a blend of adaptive technology and small-group instruction provided by a teacher. We understand the benefits of using available technology to help identify gaps in students' learning and then providing lessons and learning activities to help fill those gaps. For those who have access, adaptive technology tools have been shown to be effective in helping to increase students' learning. Navab (2022) highlights the use of adaptive learning in math, showing that the students who used an adaptive online tool showed better gains than their classmates who did not use the tool. Some of the reasons for this impact included immediate and personalized feedback, learning activities tailored to meet individual needs, and progress-tracking tools.

It is clear that the adaptive technology tools that many schools now have available to them can have a positive impact on students' learning outcomes. These tools allow students to grow in core content areas by providing individualized lessons, progress monitoring data for the teacher, immediate feedback for the students, and continued targeted lessons based on the students' performance. Several of these programs are designed with gaming elements that can be very appealing to students. We understand there is value to the judicious use of these technology tools to help maximize student learning outcomes.

While there are many advantages to the integration of technology into our instruction, there are also several dangerous pitfalls. In some cases, students are learning in such isolation that their language skills and interpersonal skills are suffering. I (Anne) have walked into many classrooms where I observed every student working on a laptop while the teacher sat at their desk engaged in their own work. To be clear, these classroom visits were taking place during a "typical" instruction block and not during a standardized online assessment. Every student was on their own device, the same as their teacher. There was not one human interaction taking place within those classrooms. Several of the students were wearing headphones and were not even aware that anyone had entered their classroom.






An article by Alhumaid (2019) found that when there is an excessive use of technology within classrooms, it results in fewer face-to-face interactions, which is detrimental to the development of communication skills. Further, due to limited interactions, students have impaired social skills. While we all want our students to make academic gains, it should not be at the expense of acquiring ECS that they will need to be successful throughout their lives. If students only acquire skills and knowledge in math, literacy, science, or social science, this will have limited value if they struggle to communicate effectively or if they fail to develop the social skills needed in school, in the workplace, and in life. If they are unable to understand how to work collaboratively or develop an appreciation for the perspectives of others, we are limiting their potential. We need to give consideration to skills beyond academic outcomes.

It is our responsibility as educators to provide a well-rounded education that will prepare our students to thrive and make contributions within our ever-changing world. In today's headlines, there is no shortage of news stories related to troubled individuals who end up harming themselves or others. As a society, we have the potential to prevent some of the challenges we face through providing an education that not only values academic growth and intelligence quotient (IQ) but is equally as committed to helping our students develop the skills they need to have a strong sense of well-being and emotional intelligence. When individuals have a high EQ they develop empathy and caring, and they have the skills needed to form positive, healthy relationships.

This book is a call to action. We need to ensure that we are balancing the instructional experiences that we are providing for our students. If the majority of their school day is spent working independently on technology tools or in small-group instruction led by their teacher, we are falling short of what they deserve and what we need collectively as a society. To fully prepare our students for what they will need when they leave us, we need to balance our instruction with experiences that enable them, with repeated opportunities, to develop ECS. The strategies within this book will help you to do just that! And, keep in mind, the integration of strategies that develop ECS also helps students to make academic gains—it's a win-win! As students work together, their interactions help them to grow in their understanding and retention of the content while they develop integral life skills.

## WHY ARE ESSENTIAL CONNECTION SKILLS SO IMPORTANT?

A study completed by Pearson (2022) of labor markets in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada looked to identify the most sought-after skills in today's ever-evolving workplace. All of the skills identified are human skills, not technical skills. These "power skills" have been recognized as the capabilities that are most needed to continue economic productivity. The skills that were identified in this global study are those that are developed when ECS are included within our classrooms. The chart below highlights the top five power skills.

PEARSON SKILLS OUTLOOK: POWER SKILLS IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE (2022)	
	<b>Communication</b> The most in-demand power skill across the board.
	<b>Customer Service</b> The ability to actively listen to a wide range of customers and respond to their needs.
	<b>Leadership</b> The skills needed to successfully motivate, guide, and organize others to achieve a common goal.
	<b>Attention to Detail</b> The ability to be accurate in your work and to pay attention to even the smallest of details.
	<b>Collaboration</b> The ability to work effectively with others including active participation in reaching a shared goal.

**Image Source:** [Istock.com/StudioU](https://www.istock.com/studioU)

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2023) identified several of the same qualities in their 2024 job outlook survey. When asked what qualities they sought in potential hires to fill their job openings, 90 percent of responders indicated that they look for individuals who are capable of solving problems, and 80 percent look for those that possess strong teamwork skills. If we hold the course with a large portion of our students' days being spent working alone on adaptive computer programs, completing work independently, or working in a small group directed by the teacher, future employers may have challenges in finding candidates with strong communication skills and the ability to work effectively with others in completing collaborative tasks. The table below represents the top attributes employers are seeking on a resume and the percentage of businesses that listed them as a skill set they are looking for in new employees, as reported by the same study.

TOP ATTRIBUTES EMPLOYERS SEEK ON A RESUME	
Problem-Solving Skills	88.7%
Ability to Work in a Team	78.9%
Communication Skills (Written)	72.7%
Strong Work Ethic	71.6%
Flexibility/Adaptability	70.1%
Communication Skills (Verbal)	67.5%
Technical Skills	67.0%
Analytic/Quantitative Skills	66.0%
Initiative	65.6%
Detail-Oriented	61.3%

**Source:** National Association of Colleges and Employers (2023).

Beyond the need and desire for individuals with these skills and abilities in the modern workplace, there are a number of other benefits for those who develop ECS. An individual who has a strong sense of who they are and can engage in self-reflection will have enhanced emotional well-being. When you have a strong sense of who you are and understand your strengths, values, goals, and purpose, you are more likely to



have high self-esteem and self-acceptance. If you have the ability to reflect on your own emotions and needs, to advocate for yourself, and to identify areas for growth, then you can build a solid foundation to have a satisfying and fulfilling life. This same foundation helps you to establish and sustain positive relationships with others, develop empathy, and cultivate consideration of multiple perspectives.

If they have a strong sense of self and the ability to reflect, individuals are more likely to develop a growth mindset and resilience. Those with emotional and mental well-being are better prepared to successfully navigate life's challenges and obstacles. When faced with adversity, these individuals tend to have more coping skills and are better able to maintain a positive outlook, recognizing that their challenges are temporary and may even hold some benefits that they are unable to see. These same individuals are better equipped to support those around them, which aids in forming and strengthening communities. Helping students to develop ECS equips them with skills and competencies that have elasticity and can be stretched and applied across a wide range of future circumstances.

Within our public schools, we have students coming to us from an incredibly wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and family lives. While some students come from families that are able to foster a sense of safety and security and can help them to build a positive self-image, other students have a far different experience. In our classrooms we have the opportunity to provide learning experiences that will help *all* of our students to be seen, heard, and valued for who they are. Intentionally planning for instruction that includes essential connection skills and competencies our students need in life will allow us to help their overall development, both in mind and in heart, in a way that a thirty-minute stand-alone SEL class cannot match.

## WE ONLY HAVE SO MUCH TIME IN THE SCHOOL DAY

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The one resource that we never seem to have enough of in education is time, so, regardless of the school or district you work in, you must make the most of the time that you *do* have with your students. If you have ever been inside a Jamba Juice, you can probably picture the wide range of vitamin and protein boosts that you can add to your smoothie. While your Caribbean Passion or Orange Dream Machine smoothie might look the same as others from the outside, it may have any number of boosts, such as a soy protein or nonfat Greek yogurt, that add



value and benefits to it. The strategies within this book, which add ECS to your instruction, provide you with a way to boost your instruction, layering benefits into the time you have with your students.

One of the keys to keep in mind is that infusing these strategies into your classroom will not only help your students develop skills and competencies that will help them succeed in life and the workplace, it will also help them to learn at a deeper level and will positively impact academic outcomes as well. Beyond that, many educators today report feeling increased levels of stress and pressure. In a K–12 Dive brief, Merod (2024) reported that, according to the Pew Research Center, more than 77 percent of the 2,531 teachers surveyed said their job is frequently stressful, with 68 percent calling it overwhelming. The study also showed that 58 percent of teachers reported the need to address behavioral issues on a daily basis. Research shows us that when students are engaged and motivated in the classroom, there are fewer behavioral disruptions, which provides positive benefits for both the students and the teachers. Teachers often share that implementing ECS into lessons has helped them to remember why they chose teaching as their profession.

When ECS are integrated into instruction, it helps to build relationships both between classmates and between students and their teachers. These strategies help to shift ownership of the learning to the students, who become far more engaged in the work and report having fun while working with their classmates. Teachers who use these strategies with their students have shared with us that they enjoy seeing the creativity and growth of their students and that it has helped to reinvigorate their passion for teaching. The closer relationships created within the classroom result in fewer behavior issues and are a compelling factor in having the students invest their resources, time, energy, and attention toward their learning. As novelist Taylor Caldwell (2016) wrote, “Learning should be a joy and full of excitement” (p. 187). Teachers and students are finding joy in the classroom again when ECS are included!

## MOVING FORWARD

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Hopefully by now you are ready to try out some of these strategies in your schools or in your classroom. In the next four chapters, we will be sharing a closer look at each of the ECS domains, and then we will give you the tools you need to integrate them into your lesson planning. Each chapter will include strategies that you can use and adapt across grade levels and

content areas. We will provide you with examples, planning tips, and assessment tools. In Chapter 6, “Connecting to All Learners,” you will find additional resources that will help you meet the differing needs of the students within your classroom. We are excited for you and your students and the elevation of their learning that you are about to provide!

## Reflection Questions

1. Why are you reading this book? What do you hope to gain?
2. What is the primary purpose of education according to this chapter, and how does this differ from the current emphasis on standardized testing?
3. What are the ECS that students in your setting need the most? How can you tell? What additional information might you gather to answer this?
4. Why is there a need to integrate ECS into classroom experiences?
5. What challenges might educators face when implementing ECS strategies in a school environment focused on technology and data-driven instruction? How can those schools overcome these challenges?