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Higher expectations of teachers are not sufficient: How to take the next big step in social-emotional teacher training

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Abstract

The growing interest in students' social-emotional development, which is closely linked with the increasing efforts to reduce all forms of violence in schools, is a welcome development. However, if we are serious about furthering students' social-emotional development with the same fervor as students' academic learning, we must provide teachers with the tools that enable them to meet these growing societal expectations. Most teachers at the secondary level are not trained to further students' social-emotional development and are still primarily regarded, by themselves and others, as academic knowledge and skills conveyors. As a result, they are not prepared to respond to students' misbehavior and difficult group dynamics in ways that further students' social-emotional development. Instead, they are forced to apply easy and quick-to-learn behavioral conditioning and punishment strategies that only manage behavior. Psychodynamic theory and empirical research suggest important limitations to this approach. Hence, I argue that teachers will be better prepared to meet these growing expectations in their work if they receive support in two ways. One, they need reliable feedback on those aspects of their daily interactions/routines with students that most strongly impact students' social-emotional development. Student percep-

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tion survey instruments are a particularly effective approach to collect such feedback, but contemporary instruments too strongly focus on behavior instead of underlying factors that determine behavior. Second, teachers need professional development training that takes into account and builds on such feedback. A particularly promising approach for such training is based on group-analytic pedagogy.

KEYWORDS
group analytic pedagogy, professional development, psychodynamic theory, social-emotional development, teacher feedback, teacher training

1 | INTRODUCTION

The growing interest in students' physical and mental well-being and their social-emotional development in schools is a welcomed development. An increasing number of researchers focus on social-emotional and academic development (SEAD) as a primary student outcome (Brown et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2015; Espelage & Cohen, 2020) and thus recognize that students' SEAD are equally important and deeply interconnected (Corcoran et al., 2018; The Aspen Institute, 2018). In his lead paper of this special issue, Jonathan Cohen (Cohen, 2021) outlines a series of relational, instructional, and systemic improvement goals and strategies that are important for researchers as well as educational and mental health practice leaders to pay close attention to. I strongly appreciate these suggestions and agree with his idea that proactive, intentional, and research-based social-emotional and academic learning/teaching is an essential part of effective school violence prevention as well as school safety improvement efforts. I would further argue that in order to effectively prevent and reduce school violence, social-emotional development research and efforts need to more strongly focus on the underlying causes of student behavior.

Nancy Rappaport's lead article of this special issue (Rappaport, 2021) supports this argument and provides a vivid example that when schools with good intentions fail to understand and consider the underlying causes of behavior, they are unable to support students' social-emotional well-being and correctly respond to negative and threatening behavior. Steven's school checks all the right boxes: the flags of many nations, the circular tables, and a highly invested school psychologist—all signal that the school aspires to be an environment that takes multiculturalism, equity, and mental health seriously. While the positive signals the school is trying to send are likely sincere, a closer look clearly shows that the staff lacks the necessary training to appropriately respond to students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBDs). This becomes particularly clear in Steven's descriptions of how he feels his teachers perceive and treat him as “damaged goods,” a “gangster in training,” and a bad kid who is constantly distracted. Even though this is only one side of the story, as perceptions always are, it shows that many teachers in Steven's school have not tried or were unable to understand the underlying causes of his threatening behavior.

This leads to the important question: How can we improve teachers' ability to better understand the underlying causes of students' behavior and more appropriately respond to them? While Nancy Rappaport's recommendations are an important first step, more can and should be done. I argue that teachers require better support and more intense professional development training than they currently receive.

2 | MORE RESPONSIBILITY REQUIRES BETTER TRAINING

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning/CASEL (2021) defines social-emotional learning (SEL) as

> [The] process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

Until a few years ago, the majority of efforts to further SEL in schools were based on intervention programs, which were add-on lessons that assume social-emotional skills can be taught directly, similar to mathematics or reading skills, and that SEL can be best furthered in separate SEL lessons (Grant et al., 2017). In traditional school subjects like mathematics, however, there are predefined correct solutions to problems. To prepare students for standardized tests, teachers demonstrate the most time-efficient strategies to correctly answer questions and try to motivate students to practice these strategies with as many examples as possible, that is, learning by repetition. CASEL's definition—although conspicuously neglecting well-being—implies that SEL goes beyond the learning of such a predefined set of strategies and behaviors. It is difficult to imagine positive attitudes and healthy identities being taught effectively in top-down instructional classes, especially among adolescents. More likely, attitudes and identities are determined by personal experience in everyday relational interactions, as suggested by psychodynamic theory in education (Hirblinger, 2001, 2011a, 2011b, 2017; Würker, 2007).

Psychodynamic theory is a grand theory comprising a set of developmentally informed psychological theories that grow out of the understandings that humans are often driven by unrecognized or unconscious motivations and coping or defensive processes and that adult personality and relationships are typically shaped by childhood experiences. Different clinicians, pedagogues, and researchers focus on a wide range of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes, such as the nature of attachment, the dynamics within groups, and the understanding of how mental states influence behavior. Due to its broader focus on the underlying causes of human behavior (e.g., Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Steele & Steele, 2018), psychodynamic theory can be applied in educational research and practice to provide clues to how teachers most effectively promote students' social-emotional development (Hirblinger, 2001, 2011a, 2011b, 2017; Würker, 2007).

Psychodynamic theory in education asserts that students need to find their own and individualized solutions to social-emotional challenges in the context of positive relationship climates, that predefined solutions to social-emotional problems do not exist, and no inner solution to a developmental challenge looks the same in two individuals (Hirblinger, 2001, 2011a, 2011b, 2017; Würker, 2007). Similar to fingerprints, the human psyche is unique, rendering one-size-fits-all solutions to social-emotional challenges ineffective. Unfortunately, students' need to follow their own social-emotional development pathways is largely overlooked in contemporary secondary-level school systems where practices of behavioral management and conditioning predominate (Hirblinger, 2017; Würker, 2007). However, it is too easy to simply blame this on teachers. The truth is, while elementary school teachers do learn a great deal about social-emotional development and its impact on learning, most teachers at the secondary school level (e.g., middle and high school teachers) are currently not trained to take care of students with EBDs. Instead, these teachers' education and training still concentrate first and foremost on the teacher's role as a knowledge conveyor (Murano et al., 2019). As a result, there is a mismatch between what secondary teachers are increasingly expected to do and the tools they receive to fulfill these growing expectations. In fact, many of these teachers fear the behavioral and mental problems of "difficult" students because they simply do not know how to handle them (Hajovsky et al., 2020). This often leads to students with EBDs being grouped together in a single classroom under the care of one or two special needs education teachers. In Germany, for example, it is an open secret that special needs education teachers (often one person in the entire school) receive the responsibility for all students with relational problems, which

in turn leads to high levels of psychological and emotional stress among these teachers (Dietrich & Zimmermann, in press). Empirical evidence suggests that such a concentration of difficult students can overwhelm even the best teachers in terms of relational competencies and lead to detrimental student outcomes (Dietrich et al., 2021). Studies in the United States and in the European Union find that approximately 10%–20% of students show signs of more severe EBDs (Forness et al., 2011; Robert Koch Institut, 2014). This makes it easier to understand why so many teachers are overwhelmed and why they are reluctant to take on a more comprehensive caretaking role in school (Graham et al., 2011).

Due to the neglect of social-emotional competencies in their education and training, teachers at the secondary level most often draw on behavioral conditioning techniques to manage student behavior. These do not require a deep understanding of the underlying (intrapsychic and latent group dynamic) causes of student misbehavior, and they give teachers a minimum feeling of control and security. The concept of classroom management in particular purports that students' behavior can be controlled if teachers apply the right (and avoid the wrong) set of behavioral strategies. For example, the American Psychological Association recommends teachers to (1) not ignore misbehavior, (2) avoid too harsh punishment, (3) combine punishment with support, (4) be consistent in rule enforcement, and (5) seek help if all these strategies do not work (Kratochwill et al., 2010). Essentially, classroom management suggests a combination of punishment and support, that is, carrots and sticks, to manage student misbehavior. Evidence-based studies confirm that such authoritative strategies do, to some extent, improve student behavior (Cornell & Huang, 2016) and academic achievement (Dever & Karabenick, 2011). They are even related to better school adjustment compared to authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful school climates (Baker et al., 2009). As such, classroom management and authoritative teaching strategies are valid and important tools for teachers under the current conditions. However, the idea that authoritative strategies in combination with SEL lessons split-off from the rest of the school curricula are the best we can do to further students' social-emotional development in schools is simply not true. Instead, SEL has to be integrated into every aspect of students' education (The Aspen Institute, 2018), and teachers must be intentionally trained in how to do this.

Due to the low priority of social-emotional competencies in secondary teachers' education and training, it is no surprise that even schools with the best of intentions, which promise to make students' social-emotional needs a priority, often fail to successfully implement measures to achieve such ambitions. In order to help teachers rely less on punishment and behavioral conditioning strategies, they need to be given new tools to positively impact their students' behavior and to establish cordial and respectful relationship climates in classrooms. Empirical findings show that classrooms in which teachers have been able to establish more positive and respectful relationships with their students are the same classrooms in which students treat each other more respectfully and perceive less bullying (Dietrich & Cohen, 2019). Recent research further strongly supports the idea that the quality of teacher–student relationships is particularly important for students' long-term social-emotional health (Kim, 2021). Hence, teachers need better ways to reflect on what they already do well in their relationship-building efforts and what they might need to improve upon.

3 | THE NEED FOR BETTER ON-THE-JOB FEEDBACK

Understanding child development and how this colors and shapes learning and teaching is a crucial foundation of teachers' ability to further students' SEAD. This has already become a staple in primary school teachers' higher education coursework (see, e.g., Bank Street Graduate School of Education, 2021; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021). However, psychodynamic theory in education indicates that additional knowledge alone is not sufficient to improve secondary teachers' social-emotional competencies (Würker, 2007), which include knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Similarly, empirical evidence shows that additional academic training (i.e., theoretical knowledge) on its own does little to improve teachers' positive impact on students' academic development (Harris & Sass, 2011). Anna Freud (1960) famously argued that teachers need to complete a psychoanalysis in order to avoid unconsciously

and unwittingly reenacting their own childhood conflicts with their students and thereby negatively impacting their students' social-emotional well-being. In an ideal world, teachers have already worked through their unconscious childhood traumas before they start teaching. But psychoanalysis cannot be forced on people, and it is still highly stigmatized in most parts of the world. As a result, we are far off from being able to implement Anna Freud's recommendation. However, if we are serious about furthering students' social-emotional development with the same fervor as students' academic learning, we must provide teachers with regular high-quality feedback on those competencies that most strongly impact students' social-emotional development at all school levels.

One approach to providing such feedback is via classroom observations in which teachers' colleagues or independent out-of-school observers sit in during lessons and rate teacher–student interactions based on their perceptions of predefined categories (Pianta, 2015). However, this approach has several drawbacks (Hill & Grossman, 2013; O'Leary, 2017; Robinson, 2020; van der Lans et al., 2016): The quality of classroom observations depends on the skills and expertise of individual observers and can thus strongly vary, many teachers worry about exposing their struggles to others, and both teachers and students might change their behavior during observations. Intensive training for observers can reduce these drawbacks (O'Leary, 2017), but also makes classroom observations comparatively resource-intensive.

Another more recent approach is to ask students themselves on their perceptions of teacher–student interactions via a set of standardized questions (Geiger & Amrein-Beardsley, 2019). The main advantage of this approach is that students not only observe a small number of lessons but rather witness the teacher throughout the entire academic year. Thus, they have more in-depth experience with and knowledge of their teacher than adult observers. Students' answers to such perception survey questions can be used to score the quality of different aspects of teacher–student interactions and thus can provide teachers with feedback on their strengths and weaknesses in their relationship building efforts with students. Furthermore, student perception scores can be aggregated to the classroom mean, which minimizes the impact of extreme perceptions by outliers. These reasons explain why student perception scores have been found to be more reliable predictors of student learning than scores based on classroom observations (Cantrell & Kane, 2013). Over the past decade, such student perception survey instruments (SPSIs) have strongly risen in popularity, particularly in the United States (Geiger & Amrein-Beardsley, 2019).

The main challenge with SPSIs is to ask students the right questions, that is, questions that lead to answers that best help teachers self-reflect and improve on the most important competencies. Contemporary instruments strongly focus on behavior and are very reliable predictors of academic learning (Cantrell & Kane, 2013). However, even though they have also been related to positive social-emotional outcomes (Dietrich, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2015), it is still unclear whether they can reliably predict students' social-emotional development due to a lack of respective research. Psychodynamic theory indicates that existing SPSIs will not turn out to be particularly strong or reliable predictors of students' social-emotional development because they neglect the underlying causes of student behavior (Hirblinger, 2017). For example, all major SPSIs ask students questions about their teacher's ability to control student behavior (Geiger & Amrein-Beardsley, 2019), but they fail to ask *how* teachers have established orderly behavior in the classroom. Students might behave because the teacher is somehow able to further respectful relationship dynamics and effectively tends to students' social-emotional needs. Alternatively, students might behave because their teacher successfully uses threats to suppress misbehavior. Teachers might not even be aware that their behavior scares students into obedience and overestimate the quality of their rapport with students. In fact, empirical evidence shows that teacher perceptions and student perceptions of the quality of teacher–student relationships often diverge, and student perceptions tend to be more relevant for students' outcomes (Hughes, 2011). Hence, it is crucial that secondary teachers learn to pay closer attention to their students' social-emotional experiences and perceptions on a regular basis, for example, via annual feedback based on SPSI scores. These can inform teachers on how to more effectively select professional development training tailored to their individual needs.

4 | TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY

Once secondary teachers have access to reliable feedback on how their students perceive and experience school, they need to be able to use this feedback for their professional development. To my knowledge, no existing SPSIs are integrated with an intensive professional development offering. This is an important missed opportunity. Some teachers might not be able to find professional development offerings that can tend to the specific needs identified by student feedback, especially when professional development trainings turn out to convey one-size-fits-all solutions. Furthermore, psychodynamic theories should inform any professional development training that builds teachers' social-emotional competencies because these theories focus on the underlying causes of behavior. But what exactly are the teacher competencies that effectively support students' social-emotional development?

Psychodynamic theory in education suggests that schools and teachers currently focus too narrowly on students' development of a moral conscience and internalized adherence to social norms, that is, they are too concerned with students' superego development (Hirblinger, 2011a). Teachers tend to communicate to students what "good behavior" looks like from their (adult) perspective and expect students to then practice this behavior. This approach is best described as an attempt to behaviorally condition because it ignores the underlying psychological and developmental causes of misbehavior (Hirblinger, 2011a). Of course, it is not unimportant for students to develop a moral conscience and to learn to distinguish right from wrong behavior. Young children in particular still require parents' and teachers' direct moral guidance (Koops et al., 2010). However, with increasing age, children and adolescents do not simply adopt adults' moral guidelines. Instead, it is, above all, the ego—the part of the mental apparatus that mediates between the conflicting demands of the superego, the id (i.e., drives), and the reality to establish an equilibrium between these three forces—that requires strengthening in order for students (and adults) to make better and more independent life decisions (Lake, 1985; White, 1963). The psychological equilibrium gained during childhood is typically lost temporarily at the adolescent stage due to a developmental burst in the id and changing demands of reality, such as increasing behavioral expectations from adults (Tyson & Tyson, 1990). This leads to the erratic, confusing emotional and behavioral states that adolescents are known for ("Sturm und Drang"). Hence, the primary social-emotional development goal of adolescent students is to establish a new mental equilibrium through ego strength development, which is the core of social-emotional development.

Psychodynamic theory suggests that teachers can support students in developing their ego strength by creating a holding (Winnicott, 1986) space, that is, an environment that supports children and adolescents in overcoming strong negative emotions that threaten to overwhelm them (Hirblinger, 2017). This holding space, which overlaps with the "socially and emotionally safe, supported and engaged" school environment Jonathan Cohen describes in his lead article, can be achieved when teachers know or learn how to detect and contain (Bion, 1970) such emotions. A holding space actively supports students' efforts to develop and mentally integrate new solutions to the psychosocial demands of their developmental stage by providing them opportunities to try out and "play" with new social roles and to develop and test their own solutions to constantly changing internal and external pressures (Hirblinger, 2011a).

Unfortunately, most school systems focus on direct instruction and rote learning that are not complemented by a holding space (Hirblinger, 2017; Würker, 2007). While direct instruction can be an effective strategy for improving certain cognitive competencies, for example, mathematics skills (Munter et al., 2015), there is strong empirical evidence that a student who is overwhelmed by negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, is less capable of cognitive learning (Sridevi, 2013). Put simply, in order to scaffold their students academically, teachers must also learn to support/scaffold them emotionally.

But how can teachers effectively contain students' negative emotions? Teachers require an advanced awareness of the impact of their own defining childhood experiences on present emotions and behaviors in order to better disentangle complicated and partially unconscious transference and countertransference processes in the classroom (Hirblinger, 2017). That is, they need to discover to which extent their own behaviors and emotional reactions derive from personal biographical experiences and to what extent they are a reaction to students' emotions and behaviors in the here and now. The ability to disentangle and correctly ascribe emotions prevents teachers themselves from being

overwhelmed and increases their understanding of what is going on in their interactions with students. This frees up their mental capacity, which can be used to help students transform negative emotions into "digestible pieces" (Bion, 1970) and build and sustain positive relationships with all students, including those with more severe EBDs (Zimmermann, 2016).

One sphere of growing interest within the realm of psychodynamic theory is mentalization, which is the ability to imagine and interpret mental states—such as needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons—and to understand how they influence one's own observable behaviors and those of others (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Mentalization theory suggests that the ability to mentalize positively impacts mental health and social-emotional and cognitive development (Allen & Fonagy, 2006; Bateman & Fonagy, 2012). Poor mentalization skills are believed to be among the main causes of social marginalization and bullying dynamics in student peer groups (Twemlow & Sacco, 2011), while stronger mentalization skills predict better social-emotional outcomes (Shai & Belsky, 2017). One of the tenets of the theory is that mentalization skills develop more effectively in the context of positive relationships (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012). This idea is supported by quantitative empirical evidence (Adkins et al., 2018) and builds on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Riley, 2010), which asserts that individuals develop either a more or less secure attachment to primary caregivers, who vary on their own attachment security and emotional responsiveness. Securely attached children of securely attached parents (or other primary caregivers) have the confidence to explore their environment and engage with strangers. In contrast, insecure children lack this basic confidence and tend to retreat, thus experiencing fewer opportunities for improving their mentalization and other social-emotional skills. Research supports the idea that teachers can take on the role of important attachment figures for their students and thus obtain the opportunity to provide them with corrective relationship experiences that can alter their entire life trajectory (Howes & Spieker, 2016; Zimmermann, 2016).

5 | THE CASE FOR TEACHER TRAINING BASED ON GROUP ANALYTIC PEDAGOGY

How can teachers most efficiently—in terms of resources and time—improve their mentalization skills and learn to create holding spaces in classrooms that effectively provide emotional scaffolding? Teachers' professional development training needs to strongly focus on teachers' self-awareness and understanding of group dynamics. In the United States, the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) and Realizing Educational Leadership and Teaching Excellence (RELATE) programs are steps in the right direction. CARE is based on the mindfulness concept and the idea of neuroplasticity to further teachers' self-reflection skills (Garrison Institute, 2021); RELATE uses a group setting to promote self-reflection on systemic issues and group dynamics, arguing that teachers meet students not as individuals but as groups most of the time during a school day (RELATE, 2021). Both programs help teachers to become learners and to pay close attention to their interpsychic and intrapsychic experiences to further social-emotional development and well-being among students and teachers (Jennings, 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

An even more promising approach for teacher development training comes from Europe and is based on group analytic theory and methods. Group analytic theory agrees with the RELATE program in that students in classrooms are not to be understood only as individuals (Foulkes, 1983). Instead, classes—like all groups—develop unique group characteristics and dynamics and remain at a regressive state when the group leader's behavior causes strong feelings of uncertainty and insecurity in group members (Naumann, 2014). For example, this happens when group leaders—such as teachers—do not provide sufficient structure and support (Bion, 1991).

However, extensive experience from group analysis has shown that group leaders who use their role and interpersonal interventions for the benefit of the group's coherence and individual group members' well-being slowly and incrementally wean the group off from its leadership dependence (Behr & Hearst, 2018). As a result, groups can overcome their regressive states as the so-called basic assumption groups (Bion, 1991) and reach the state of productive working groups, whose members become simultaneously more independent and positively interconnected. As such, the goal of a group analyst is not to give a group of individuals therapy but to further supportive and pro-social group

dynamics that provide group members with corrective relationship experiences (Foulkes, 1983). During this process, all group members learn from their peers socially and emotionally on conscious and on less conscious levels, even when they choose not to actively engage with other group members, because they automatically identify with other group members who do actively engage. As a result, individual members in group analysis are never forced to expose themselves. Group analysis also primarily focuses on the “here and now” of relationships, which makes this method well-suited for nonclinical purposes.

Group analytic pedagogy asserts that teachers can learn from group analytic experiences and techniques (Naumann, 2014). Training based on group analytic pedagogy makes several important modifications to the traditional group analytic setting because its goal is not therapy. Most importantly, it outlines clear professional boundaries that exclude difficult personal issues best treated in therapeutic settings. Similar to group analysis, however, teachers receive group analytic pedagogical training in a group context where they gain first-hand experience of how group leaders positively influence relationship dynamics and how these positive relationship dynamics translate into SEL among group members.

In summary, there is a growing number of approaches and programs that can help teachers improve on their interpsychic and intrapsychic reflection skills and their understanding of group processes. They promise to increase teachers' ability to create more pro-social and holding relationship climates in classrooms and thus more effectively reduce school violence and further students' social-emotional development. However, these programs and approaches need further empirical evaluation.

6 | CONCLUSION

Recent efforts to further SEL in schools are important and welcome, but more can be done and is necessary if students' SEL is to be treated as equally important as academic learning. While evidence-based research has revealed strategies and interventions that strongly increase academic learning among those who need it most, evaluations of SEL interventions show less impressive results. Hence, there is a need to rethink the role of secondary school teachers as that of simple knowledge conveyors to a more holistic care approach. However, such rising expectations of teachers are not sufficient, even counterproductive, if they are not complemented by teacher education and training that provides them with more effective tools to positively impact students' social-emotional development in schools. For this purpose, teachers need reliable feedback on students' lived experiences in schools and students' perceptions on teachers' social-emotional competencies as well as access to training that uses such feedback to help teachers advance professionally and that tends to their individual needs. Teachers’ professional development training should be informed by psychodynamic theories and based on group analytic pedagogical methods, which can help teachers' ability to create a holding classroom climate and to improve their own mentalization skills. Equipped with these new competencies, teachers will be better prepared to understand the underlying causes of students' misbehavior, especially those with more severe EBDs, and effectively respond to difficult classroom group dynamics. This in turn should strongly improve their positive impact on students' social-emotional development and students' relational experiences in schools and thus reduce and prevent all forms of violence in schools.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I have no conflict of interest to declare.

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