



To succeed in school and prepare for future jobs, students need to hone a range of skills. In addition to developing cognitive domains (such as curiosity and flexibility), students need to develop a penchant for self-directed and collaborative work. Learning to navigate life's challenges and work with others lies within the social and emotional domains. Calling these "soft skills" has denigrated their value and makes false assumptions that higher-order thinking and communication are not at the core

## NAVIGATING Social and Emotional ISSUES

Art develops self-regulation and a sense of belonging



of these complex abilities. Referring to social and emotional skills as "human literacy" elevates and recognizes how essential competence in interpersonal relationships is to success at every stage in the human life cycle.

### Workforce Readiness Skills

Global Institute studies, as well as reports from technology giant Google, emphasize the importance of social and emotional competence. According to McKinsey Global Institute's *A Future That Works Report* (2017), about half of the jobs currently performed by humans (amounting to \$15.8 trillion in compensation worldwide) will be automated in today's students' lifetime. What will help children graduate with skills that are not more adeptly done by artificial

intelligence? Employment insights from Google shed light on this.

Google conducted several internal data analysis studies to see what individual and team success look like in their employees. Leaders were surprised with the results. Originally, Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page established hiring practices based on a deep conviction that only computer scientists could excel in this technology-driven organization. They set up hiring algorithms that prioritized the applications of computer science graduates who received top grades from elite universities. However, after analyzing data on hiring, firing, performance reviews, and promotions from 1998 to 2013, Brin and Page realized they had it all wrong.

The most important qualities for success at Google include:

- Being a good coach;
- Communicating and listening well;
- Possessing insights into others' values and points of view;
- Having empathy toward and being supportive of colleagues;
- Being a good critical thinker and creative problem-solver;
- Making cross-disciplinary connections around complex ideas; and
- Articulating a clear vision.

Google also studied what made teams effective and learned that contrary to their assumptions, they were not led by top scientists with technical mastery. Instead, they were led by people who "didn't have to prove they were the smartest in the room." Traits including generosity, emotional intelligence, risk-taking, not being afraid to speak up or make mistakes, and being curious were at the top of the list.

Google shifted hiring practices and began recruiting artists and humanities majors. They realized that technological knowledge in the STEM fields was not as critical as the ability to navigate human relationships.



## Human Literacy

Navigating human interactions requires a strong sense of self-awareness and a deep understanding of others. Learning communities need to guide youth as they sort out complicated identity issues, including “who am I?” and “where do I belong?” These human literacy competencies cannot be neglected in favor of testable academic subjects.

Human literacy skills can be taught throughout each day as part of every interaction. Self-reflection and appropriate behavior are modeled. Conflicts are resolved and disruptions are addressed in “real time.”

Charlotte Lab School in North Carolina has found that intentionally scheduling half-hour sessions three times each week to focus on human literacy skills has made a significant difference in the way students interact with each other and regulate themselves. Principal Mary Moss Brown, working with the school’s director of wellness, Meegan Whelan, developed *Advisory Groups*, in which approximately 10 students meet with an adult to focus mindfully on understanding self and others. Brown calls it “sacred time for social and emotional learning, scheduled so it isn’t a happenstance.” These sessions are rich in art-integrated experiences.

Brown explains, “Students sketch what might be difficult to articulate. When children aren’t ready to disclose a problem, they often start by drawing what is on their minds. Art helps children make sense of the world and bring abstract concepts like relationships into something tangible that can be discussed.” Sketching in student journals is a daily experience in Brown’s school, where the focus is on optimism, passion-projects, and growth mindset.

## A Sense of Belonging

Art integration is an important strategy that helps Belle Chasse Academy students develop a sense of home and belonging. Mary

**Human Literacy**  
[hyoo'-men lit'-er-a-see]: **noun** **1.** Knowledge of and fluency in communicating with people. **2.** The art of navigating human interactions with a strong sense of self-awareness and deep understanding of others. **3.** Social and emotional self-regulation and interaction skills.





Swazey, principal of this school set in the middle of the Belle Chasse Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, describes how art helps her transient population deal with the vulnerabilities of frequent moves.

“Using art and visual symbols helps them identify their ever-changing perceptions of who they are, how home transcends place, and enables them to build a sense of belonging,” says Swazey. “Art helps them restore memories and realize that personal identity and belonging are not rooted in a permanent structure, but instead in the traditions, values, and connections we form with people along the journey.”

Students whose home lives are uprooted frequently, whether due to



military assignments or other situations beyond their control, including poverty and evictions as well as political unrest and immigration, deal with complex social and emotional issues. Belle Chasse Academy students engage in art experiences that help them explore their personal narratives. For example, in art they layered images, referencing the layers of their lives.

“It provided a deep perspective on what matters,” Swazey continues. “Being transient means constantly struggling with what is important. The art experience helped students realize that it doesn’t matter what you own—only what is within matters, and the memories that continue to emerge.”

Swazey cites a stirring example

of how writing and illustrating personal stories can empower students. One student reported that on her maternal side, ancestors were torn from Africa for slave trade. On her paternal side, Nazis ripped her family from their homes, with only her great-grandfather surviving Auschwitz. “One part of me cries thinking of how many bonded slaves were thrown into the sea to die. Another part of me cries thinking of all the infants thrown into furnaces. But all of me is ready to step forward to make sure neither of these disgusting displays of hatred ever happens again,” a Belle Chasse fifth-grader wrote.

### Responses That Build Self-Regulation and Restoration

Educators face students who struggle with social and emotional challenges every day. Bobby Riley, principal of Integrated Arts Academy in Burlington, Vermont, shares his philosophy on behavior challenges and how principals can change the discipline paradigms: “Kids don’t intentionally get in trouble,” Riley explains. “When they act out, there is always something else going on. Especially in that moment, kids have difficulty articulating what is at the root of the issue.”

His school uses the arts as therapeutic listening strategies. “Instead of jumping to disciplinary consequences, we follow a protocol that focuses on getting the long-term results we want.” Riley continues by outlining the steps to this approach (a series of *R*s that make it easy to remember):

**Readiness:** Proactively prepare the entire learning community with a child-centered, nonpunitive approach to discipline. Establish a vocabulary that fosters conversations about triggers. Discuss school culture and shared accountability for a cohesive, safe environment. Establish a growth mindset that recognizes that people learn from mistakes. Behavioral outbursts are mistakes and should be treated like any other



mistake. “Kids don’t get punished for making math mistakes, so why would social and emotional mistakes be treated more punitively?” Riley asks. Sketching key ideas helps make this tangible for students and prepares them before incidents occur.

**Recognize:** Explore the layers beneath the surface, starting with your own emotions. “When a kid kicks, cusses, or throws a chair at you, it isn’t about you. This cannot





be about adults owning power. Restrain your emotional reactions. Recognize and avoid power struggles with students. Instead, think about what adverse experiences might have triggered the child's episode," Riley urges.

**Regulate:** Start with co-regulation and move to self-regulation. Help the student calm down, but don't confuse calm as always meaning regulated. "Sit together, be there for her, take a

walk together, or shoot some hoops. Figure out what this kid needs to release tension and channel energy more productively," Riley advises. Ultimately, the goal is for students to self-regulate. Initially, co-regulation helps to model the process.

**Respond:** Conversations matter. Before addressing the situation, comment on something that acknowledges the relationship or a shared experience. Timing is everything. "When you sense it is time for the child to talk, start with something open-ended, like 'Sounds like you had a rough morning. ...' Don't address the incident immediately. It can increase anxiety," Riley warns.

**Reflect:** When the student is ready to share how he or she is feeling, use the arts to help draw it out. Try sketches, puppet storyboards, or mini-drama moments—whatever media suits that student's style. Riley explains, "Kids who have difficulty articulating what is wrong tend to open up when I ask them to draw how they feel or doodle why they are so angry. Dry-erase boards are great for this, since they can be easily wiped away—emphasizing this is not a permanent mark on the child. We can fix this."

**Restore:** This is the most important part of the process. Start with sketches that show how others might have felt when this happened or what others might need. Doodle some ideas of how this could be fixed. Visuals make these ideas tangible. Riley has seen students offer to clean a classmate's desk or help another class after these restorative ideas were put into the child's hands. "Don't make kids apologize," Riley cautions principals. "Forced hollow apologies undermine this entire process. I usually close the conversation with, 'Is there anything else you want to say?' The point is that we all make mistakes and mistakes need to be fixed, not punished and not trivialized by forced apologies."

Riley summarizes his advice, "Our immediate goal is to de-escalate difficult social-emotional

situations. Art helps turn behavior issues into learning opportunities. Our long-term goal is to create citizens who think about how we treat each other." This six-step process shifts social-emotional challenges from disciplinary repercussions to shared responsibility in a respectful learning community.

### Human Potential Imperative

Nobel laureate economist James Heckman serves as a spokesperson on the economics of human potential. According to Heckman, the greatest returns on educational investments are "from nurturing children's noncognitive skills, giving them social, emotional, and behavioral benefits that lead to success in life." Heckman explains that investing in social-emotional skills increases the "quality and productivity of the workforce through fostering motivation, perseverance, and self-control." (*The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*, 2004.)

*HeckmanEquation.org* quotes the economist as saying, "There is too much focus on developing cognitive skills where knowledge can be tested, rather than on the development of social skills—such as attentiveness, persistence, and working with others." Heckman warns, "Our focus on strictly measuring cognitive achievement is undermining the development of American character, the ability to combine collaboration, creativity, and persistence with intelligence." Embracing this imperative has the potential to shift students' thinking from "Goals are impossible" to "I'm possible," when empowered with human literacy skills.

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