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## FOUR APPROACHES PROMOTING SOCIAL LEARNING, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, RESILIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Four approaches promoting social learning, conflict resolution, resilience and engagement. As educator with an affinity for science, certified mindfulness trainer (MBSR trainer) according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, certified Community Resiliency Model (CRM)<sup>®</sup> trainer by the Trauma Resource Institute, and co-director of the organization MARA O Mindfully Experiencing Life in Austria, I find myself at the interface between science and practice. I have noticed, that there already exists a wealth of evidence-based and scientifically validated models that effectively support educational communities in promoting social learning, conflict resolution, resilience, which naturally leads to engagement. As I've seen, the biggest challenge in this area at the moment is, to get hold of the information of such programs, to verify the scientific validity, to support the scientific validity with further research, if needed, to adapt them, if necessary, to the needs of the educational community to which we belong, and, finally, to support the implementation process in education. In my experience, interdisciplinary collaborations between science, practice, and different local stakeholders are a prerequisite to be able to support this development. In this article, four different approaches, which are related to the educational common concept, are presented, including the specific scientific foundation:

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- 1) plus prevention program for schools in the 5th to 8th grade, developed by the Austrian agency for addiction prevention
- 2) The Toolbox is You, a practical book on mindfulness for schools, edited by Osterloh - Verein für Achtsamkeit in Germany
- 3) The Community Resiliency Model (CRM)®, developed for all communities by the Trauma Resource Institute in California, USA
- 4) Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning K-12 education program, developed by Emory University in Georgia, USA

Finally, I address the question of how these approaches are related and what next steps result from them. With this article I would like to promote the transfer of interdisciplinary knowledge from science to practice as well as the transfer of experience from practice to science in order to accelerate development in pedagogy on both sides. I see this as a crucial approach due to the rapid social changes taking place these days globally. I would like to sincerely thank the SMOOTH conference committee for the opportunity to place this topic within the SMOOTH project.

Keywords: educational community, social learning, conflict resolution, resilience, interdisciplinary collaborations,

## **Four approaches promoting social learning, conflict resolution, resilience and engagement**

First, the four approaches - plus prevention program, The Toolbox is You, Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning and the Community Resiliency Model (CRM)<sup>®</sup> - are described and examined for their scientific relevance:

### **plus prevention program**

plus is a standardized, manualized, universal addiction prevention program for grades 5-8. plus specifically supports students in the development of cognitive, social and emotional skills necessary to cope with upcoming developmental tasks and aims to reduce the likelihood of the emergence and maintenance of socially maladaptive and harmful behaviors. plus has been implemented throughout Austria by addiction prevention specialists since 2009 (Rabeder-Fink & Schmidbauer 2020, 16).

The foundation for the prevention program plus is the 6-phase model (Uhl 1998, 171), including basic research, prevention research, conceptualization and development, review, and routinization.

Basic scientific research includes, among other things: the collection of epidemiological data to identify problem areas and consumption trends, the formulation of theories that explain the development of consumption, abuse and dependence, and the development of valid and reliable instruments for measuring abusive behavior and other relevant variables.

Prevention research formulates and examines causal models to influence consumption initiation, change, reduction and cessation in specific target groups. During the review phase, the feasibility and effectiveness of measures is checked. One of the tasks for research is to determine the targeted elements of an intervention. The routine phase represents the conclusion of the scientifically based introduction of preventive measures. It is achieved when the programs are routinely used by a large group of users. (Bühler & Kröger 2006)

The plus program was developed from 2006 to 2009. The teaching units were continually tested and feedback from teachers was systematically obtained. From 2009 to 2013, the program was implemented throughout Austria and evaluated with the goals, on the one hand, to continuously improve the program (formative evaluation) (Juen 2013, 45-46) and, on the other hand, to measure the program's impact on the students (summative evaluation).

The plus concept also takes into account the framework conditions set by the Austrian school system. The structure of the program is characterized by a flexible

framework with fixed and variable modules that can be adapted to the needs of the class. The plus addiction prevention curriculum runs like a common thread through four years of teaching. In the manual, the teaching staff will find precisely described teaching suggestions on specific topics that are close to the students' lives.

The program is structured in the following areas of focus:

- 1) Finding resources and dealing with each other
- 2) Integrating resources and expanding competencies
- 3) Applying and practicing skills more intensively
- 4) Maintaining skills under difficult conditions (Rabeder-Fink & Schmidbauer 2020, 16)

The analysis of the data shows that the implementation of plus is significantly related to

- 1) a lower increase of behavior problems in students' self-assessment
- 2) a lower increase in peer problems in students' self-assessment
- 3) a better assessment of the students' behavior at school by the teachers
- 4) a better assessment of school performance by the teachers
- 5) a better assessment of the extent of consideration by teachers
- 6) a smaller increase in reports of consumption experiences with cigarettes and alcohol, particularly in cities over 20,000 inhabitants (Juen 2013, 40-41)

In addition, a few criteria could be identified for successful implementation:

- 1) The smaller increase in consumption experiences with cigarettes and alcohol is only positively related to plus if at least half of the 40 planned units are carried out
- 2) The lower level of behavioral problems is only positively related to plus if at least half of the 40 planned sessions are carried out
- 3) Increased parental involvement in the implementation of plus is positively associated with reducing levels of behavior problems (Rabeder-Fink & Schmidbauer 2020, 19)

The very fact that the prevention program can only be effective if it is fully implemented shows how carefully its implementation in the school system must be planned. (Juen & Polleichtner 2017, 24)

The plus program has been offered in regular operation since 2013/14 by all addiction prevention departments in cooperation with the universities of education and the school authorities in Austria.

## The Toolbox is You

‘The Toolbox is You’ (Kluge, 2019) is a book that is suitable for children and young people with the aim of cultivating mindfulness in the classroom. The author Maria Kluge is a certified mindfulness teacher. Her professional experience as well as the exchange with renowned people from the field of mindfulness research, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, mean that the toolbox is always up to date with the latest research.

The project ‘The Toolbox is You’ (Toolbox) was initiated by Osterloh - Association for Mindfulness, an organization that aims to bring mindfulness into society. In total, the Toolbox contains the following seven topic areas, which can be worked on independently of each other in the classroom: Breath and Breathing; My Body, My Friend; Open Thinking; MindfulnessIn Motion; Awareness; Mindful Language; Calm And Cool-Headedness. The book contains a variety of stories, illustrations, exercise instructions and posters on the respective subject areas (Fidler & Trunk 2021, 87-88). Additionally, since 2023 there is also an online booklet for teachers available.

Mindfulness as a direct experience that precedes language and category formation therefore evades linguistic descriptions and mental categories. This is expressed by the following analogy:

It doesn't matter how much you know about an apple - only once you have eaten an apple you will know what it tastes like. (Tang, 2019, 16)

Nevertheless, scientists have tried to come close to a definition of mindfulness that can serve as a basis for their own work. A widely used definition is the following:

[...] the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment. (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 145)

In order to prevent misunderstandings, KarlheinzValtl makes this definition more specific by expanding it by a second dimension:

Mindfulness refers to the ability of people to consciously control their attention and focus it on the experience of the present moment, combined with a ‘mindful attitude’, which is described with terms such as non-judgmental, acceptance, patience and compassion.

Mindfulness thus combines two dimensions that are otherwise viewed independently of one another, namely mental abilities (here especially attention regulation) and ethically relevant attitudes. (Valtl 2019, 2)

The impact of mindfulness has been proven by numerous scientific studies for decades, which means that mindfulness is gaining increasing interest in pedagogy. General mindfulness practice leads among others to improved ability to concentrate (e.g. Tang et al. 2007), increased cognitive performance (e.g., Gard et al. 2014), improved attention control (e.g., Cahn & Polich 2006), less feeling of stress and better coping with stress (e.g. Cohen & Williamson 1983 and Chiesa & Seretti 2009), emotional stability (e.g., Ostafin & Kassmann 2012), better physical perception and intuition (e.g., Khalsa et al. 2008), more creativity (e.g., Ostafin & Kassmann 2012), and more compassion and empathy (e.g., Decety & Jackson 2004).

There also exist some research on mindfulness in the classroom and with children and youth. The results are similar: Increased well-being, better dealing with interpersonal problems, increased resilience, increased self-esteem, decreased depressive symptoms, lower stress levels, less anxiety, less test anxiety (e.g., Gouda et al. 2016; meta-analysis Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz & Walach 2014; Meiklejohn et al. 2012; Liehr & Diaz 2010; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor 2010; Black, Miliam & Sussman 2009; Napoli et al. 2005).

Further meta-analyses concerning mindfulness in the classroom are still needed.

If we look at the process of the implementation of the Toolbox, we can see the following:

Basic research and mindfulness research are almost complete, and the product 'The Toolbox is You' has already been designed and developed. About 270 schools already work with the Toolbox. From a scientific perspective, the review phase of 'The Toolbox is You' is still open and a cooperation with a university would be desirable. From a school development perspective, cooperation with universities of education (Pädagogische Hochschulen) and school authorities in the German-speaking area would accelerate implementation.

### **Community Resiliency Model (CRM)®**

The Community Resiliency Model (CRM)®, which was developed by Elaine Miller-Karas, co-founder of the Trauma Resource Institute, and has distilled the complexity of neuroscience into simple, understandable concepts, has a profound impact on individuals and communities by providing a practical framework for enhancing emotional well-being and resilience. Developed to address the effects of trauma and stress, CRM as a biologically based model offers simple yet effective skills that help people understand and regulate their nervous system responses. This approach helps individuals understand the common human responses to stressful and traumatic events through a lens of biology. By teaching the six CRM skills such as grounding, resourcing, and tracking sensations, CRM helps individuals

discern the difference between sensations of distress and well-being. Once discernment is made, a person chooses what to pay attention to - sensations of distress or sensations of well-being.

It is used for self-care for children, teens, and adults to stabilize emotions, resulting in more adaptive thinking when facing emotional and physical distress. CRM can be delivered by the natural leaders of communities (e.g., teachers, first responders) and mental health therapists and medical practitioners. (Miller-Karas 2023, 24-25)

One component that lots of resilience definitions have in common is that resilience involves learning from crises. This means that resilience is to a certain extent reactive and first requires real confrontation with stress, problems and crises (Windle 2011, 152). Resilience is not understood as a return to the status quo, but rather the adaptive dimension of resilience while maintaining the highest possible quality of life is the focus (Brinkmann et al. 2017, 645). Elaine Miller-Karas expands on this understanding of resilience:

Resiliency is an individual's and community's ability to identify and use individual and collective strengths in living fully in the present moment, and to thrive while managing the activities of daily living. (Miller-Karas, 2020)

CRM relies on a concept called "interoception" from the neuroscience:

Conscious awareness of the body's internal state and its perturbations, the 'felt sense' or interoception, is currently under study as a source of emotion regulation and resiliency. Interoception, which means 'looking inside,' is critical to preventing stress-related sequelae of trauma. (Grabbe & Miller-Karas 2018, 77)

Although the foundation of CRM is mindfulness in the sense of present-moment awareness, CRM is rather based on a rich tradition of body-oriented psychotherapy, such as Somatic Experiencing (Levine 2010).

The World Health Organization's call for low-dose, transferrable, and sustainable mental health interventions to deal with the burgeoning global mental health crisis highlights the need for models of mental healthcare which can meet three requirements:

- 1) reducing vulnerability to mental health problems
- 2) decreasing the sequelae of these problems
- 3) promoting healing (Grabbe et al. 2023, e43)

Since these issues affect society as a whole, they are also reflected in the classroom, which raises the question of possible interventions. CRM could be an effective intervention to these issues, as it is a strategy that incorporates task-sharing at two levels: people can become certified to deliver CRM concepts and skills to their communities and organizations, and people they teach can informally share the model with people in their own networks, augmenting the impact on global mental well-being (Grabbe et al. 2023, e43). This effect could also be interesting for schools, in particular for ‘hotspot schools’.

Concerning the impact of CRM, there already exist some studies, mainly in the field of healthcare. CRM has already been implemented in some schools. From a scientific perspective, further studies, including meta-analyses on the impact of CRM are needed, in particular in the school context. From a school development perspective, cooperation with universities of education and school authorities would accelerate implementation.

### **Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning**

Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning (SEE Learning), which was developed by the Emory University, aims to cultivate the holistic development of individuals by fostering social and emotional intelligence, ethical awareness, and compassionate action for young people in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. There is growing evidence that these components improve academic performance, mental health, (Burroughs & Barkauskas 2017) and ethical decision-making (Cohen 2006).

The free SEE Learning curriculum expands on social emotional learning (SEL) frameworks (Dusenbury et al. 2015) by drawing on the latest research pertaining to attention training, the cultivation of compassion for self and others, resilience- and trauma-informed skills, systems thinking, and ethical discernment. The expertise of the Community Resiliency Model (CRM)<sup>®</sup> is included into the SEE Learning curriculum and has been intended for international implementation (Borden 2019, 217-2018).

Across all age levels of the curriculum, there are nine components: Attention and Self-Awareness, Self-Compassion, Self-Regulation (personal domain), Interpersonal Awareness, Compassion for Other, Relationship Skills (social domain), Appreciating Interdependence, Recognizing Common Humanity, and Community and Global Engagement (systemic domain) (Emory University 2019, 19).

Different from the SEL curricula, the inclusion of the ethical learning component brings an increased awareness of how individuals are interrelated within part of a larger system and prepares young people for their roles as global citizens (Borden, 2019, 219).



2019, SEE Learning was launched to an audience of more than 1,000 people representing almost 40 countries (Borden 2019, 218). This curriculum is grounded in the most recent research related and was supported by experts in education, developmental psychology, and scientists including Daniel Goleman, Mark Greenberg, Thupten Jinpa, Robert Roeser, Sophie Langri, Tara Wilkie, Kimberly Schoner-Reichl, and the staff from Emory University. It was designed to fit into school programs throughout the world (Emory University 2019, 4).

We can see, that basic and subject-specific research, which is the foundation of the conceptualization and development of the SEE Learning program, exist. According to the information on the website of the Emory University, Emory University is actually working on global research with the aim of deepening the understanding of best-practices in the implementation of SEE Learning, measuring impact to promote program effectiveness, and developing standards of implementation. This global research program consists of research projects running across ten countries aligned to study the impact of SEE Learning across diverse settings and contexts.

(Retrieved 11/07/2023 from <https://seelearning.emory.edu/en/research>)

Currently, more than 130 countries access SEE Learning, there are more than 50 international affiliates, and more than 700 trained facilitators.

(Retrieved 11/07/2023 from <https://seelearning.emory.edu/en/home>)

From a scientific perspective, further studies, including meta-analyses on the impact of SEE Learning are needed. From a school development perspective, cooperation with universities of education and school authorities worldwide would accelerate implementation.

## Conclusion

These four programs are all based on mindfulness and aim, among other things, to promote resilience and prosocial behavior, which also implicitly leads to an improvement in conflict resolution skills. Apart from the plus prevention program, it is striking that the other three approaches were implemented in a wide scale before the impact of the approaches had been scientifically verified. Concerning CRM and SEE Learning, the review phase is taking place at the same time as the implementation and routinization, while the review phase for the Toolbox is still open. Meta-analyses are still needed for all four approaches. In addition, all approaches have found the opportunity to be widely used in the educational sector. Further cooperation with universities of education and school authorities

worldwide would be recommended both in terms of quality assurance and to accelerate further implementation.

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