Social/Emotional Competencies for Teachers

Interview with Megan Marcus, M.A., M.Ed., Founder and CEO of FuelEd Schools

Interviewed by Ken Huey, Ph.D., Founder of CALO/ATN Board Member

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Transcript: Marcus

Ken: Hello everyone! This is Dr. Ken Huey with CALO back again with another interview from the Educating Traumatized Children Summit: The online gathering of expert voices in how to provide trauma sensitive school experiences for children.

This summit has been created by the Attachment & Trauma Network, ATN, and we are very pleased today to have Megan Marcus with us to talk about social-emotional learning for teachers, really creating trauma sensitive schools and educators.

So just a little bit about Megan if I could... Ms. Marcus is the founder of FuelEd Schools. She holds a bachelor’s in psychology from the University of California at Berkeley and a masters degree in psychology from Pepperdine University, and Education Policy and Management from Harvard.

Over the past several years, Ms. Marcus has conducted research on the social-emotional competencies of teachers at Boston Teacher Residency and also served as the lead researcher for the social neuroscience of education.

There is a book we will be talking about a little bit by Dr. Louis Cozolino, we will be exploring about how strong teacher-student relationships trigger neuroplasticity and serves as the research foundation of the Fuel Ed program.

Welcome Megan!

Megan: Thank you, thanks for having me.

Ken: All right, well let’s jump right in. If you can start for us and tell us a little bit about the “why” behind the Fuel Ed schools, why you decided it was important to create a program for training teachers in Attachment Theory and Social Neuroscience.

Megan: Absolutely, I would love to. So a little bit about how FuelEd got started and the “why”. My first professional aim was actually to be a therapist, so I studied psychology at UC/Berkley. I went on to get a Masters of Psychology at Pepperdine. At the same I had
Ken: An incredible opportunity to work with a professor on his book; *The Social Neuroscience of Education* by Dr. Lou Cozolino.

This experience essentially, we were taking the field of social neuroscience, which as a discipline looked at the brain as a social organ and human beings as social creatures- we are wired to connect. And we take that field and really for the first time ever, applied it to teaching and learning in K through 12 schools.

So the question was, okay, if we know the brain is a social organ, we know humans learn through relationships, what are the implications for our school system? How are schools set up to thrive and succeed when the relationships are placed at the center or unfortunately, sometimes we often fail, and really fail, our students when relationships are not placed at the center.

And so through this experience, I became fascinated by the educator-student relationship. Time and time again, every field that we looked at it, it was that attachment that emotional connection between the teacher and her student or even amongst the students that was created and fostered by the teacher, that relationship was really pivotal to all change that happened because it impacts the academic, the social, the emotional developmental life outcomes for these kids were changing and the relationship was at the core.

So that was really interesting in its own rite, including the science behind why relationships drive learning. But what really served as a catalyst for Fuel Ed was the fact that I was, as I said, training to be a therapist at the same time. And so it became pretty clear to me early on, these parallels between the classroom environment and the therapeutic environment. Both are really just interpersonal learning settings. All learning...

Ken: Say that again. Say it again. Interpersonal what?

Megan: Interpersonal learning settings.

Ken: Okay.

Megan: All learning and growth happens on the stage of the relationship whether it’s in the classroom or in the therapy setting. It’s also, both professions at their best I believe are about human development. And so what I saw was parallel after parallel between these two fields until I chose to look at the training.

And while I knew from my own training that therapists are often times trained to build and leverage this relationships with their clients, promote their clients growth and
learning, but when I took a look at teacher education, I was shocked to find that we are training teachers as technical instructors; content knowledge pedagogy skills despite the fact that they are being put in positions to be counsel figures, parent figures, mentor figures, all of these different hats they wear, all of these different roles, all these different emotions, their own emotions, the kids emotions and no preparation for the social-emotional element of learning which is so important to creating a learning environment.

Ken: I want to pause on that for just one second then. So this is fascinating. You're saying here we are training teachers in pedagogy skills and that kind of hard knowledge. Are you saying it's the relationship stuff that we are not teaching is most important and more important or just equally important?

Megan: It's the foundation. A lot of times we teach teachers through our program, it's overwhelming because they've already learned all this stuff about classroom management and how to create a lesson plan and their content and they say, “How can I add this to my plate?” It is the plate!

Ken: I see.

Megan: The relationship is the plate itself and everything else is built on top of that, that emotional attachment is what opens us up as humans to learning.

Ken: All right.

Megan: So what happened was I saw this gap, this missing piece in teacher education and I came to believe during this time that it was the mismatch between the teachers training and the teacher’s task. What we were preparing them to do and what we were asking them to do.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: But not only was it hurting children’s learning success but it was also hurting teachers creating large amounts of burnout, large amounts of turnover in the profession. And at that point I said, “Hey, we have to do something about it” and that’s when Fuel Ed was founded. Our mission is essentially to improve student outcomes by developing the social and emotional competencies of educators. And we believe that if educators are equipped with these kinds of social-emotional capacities, they will be better able to build relationships not just with students but also with all the stakeholders; the teachers, administrators, parents and through those relationships the kids will thrive.
Ken: I see. All right so we are talking about some information and you’ve already covered that that it is just not typically taught to teachers. So now you are in the very sort of lead guard giving this information, helping get teachers up to speed. What changes have the teachers that have been through your program seen?

Megan: Great question. We see a lot of different changes. I would say they are really focus around understanding more about the science of relationships, learning more of the skills of relationships and finally the self-awareness of relationships.

So one piece of it is simply understanding the science. Once you understand this idea of attachment, that it exists and I have been shocked over and over again to see how few teachers actually learn about this or haven’t heard of it. Once you understand that this is the foundational science and this is the foundational concept that if you see this behavior in your student, it doesn’t necessarily mean defiance. It is necessarily mean disrespect. It’s a new way to conceptualize the student.

And through that conceptualization, the teacher will depersonalize the behavior, they won’t take it personally, it won’t endanger them. And it also won’t lead to them kind of lashing out at the students. So creating a better understanding of students and how their behavior is really a signal of their relationship needs, allows the teacher to better serve the relationship needs because as we all know relational trauma can only be healed relationally. So that’s one thing kind of around the science, around having a better knowledge base.

Another impact is around the skills of relationships. We know from executive research, what relationship behaviors promote secure attachment and which relationship behaviors promote insecure attachment. And so simply by learning to distinguish those two and actually being trained in some things like empathy, genuine communication.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: Understanding the idea of shame and how things that we can say can inadvertently communicate the message of shame. The teacher’s really practical relationship skills improve and they saw that through providing empathy, simply mirroring the child’s experience, help the child self regulate, solve their own problems, develop in ways that they hadn’t before the classroom.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: The final kind of impact that we see which I am most excited about because I think that is where the fundamental change happens, is through the self-awareness of these educators.

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Megan: Educators become aware of their own emotional triggers. They become aware of their own attachment, how it gets tangled with the kids' attachment at times or either of other adult attachments. And we've seen a huge improvement in terms of their ability to reign in their automatic negative emotional reactions to become more calm, present and patient response to student.

Ken: Sure. So that’s actually a good question to ask. You say it will be calm, but how else does understanding their own attachment style, their own triggers, how does it impact classroom behavior?

Megan: Can you repeat the question?

Ken: Yeah, sure so how is it helpful? In what ways is it helpful to understand their own attachment styles, their own triggers, how does that impact the classroom behavior?

Megan: Sure, sure. That’s a great question and I think it’s relates to a fundamental kind of difference in the model that we have compared to other professional development programs. So we not only provide kind of instructional workshops where the teachers get content, right, on the science, on the skills on self-awareness, and relationships, but a core element of what we do is we provide educators with opportunities to engage in small groups and one-on-one led by trained professional therapists.

So the reason this kind of piece of our program came about, similarly going back to my training as a therapist, I understood that often times that therapists are required to undergo their own personal counseling before they go into the field.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: It is an emotionally taxing job because we are humans and we get triggered in relationships.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: And when we are triggered our needs take over as opposed to being able to provide for the needs of the other person.

Ken: Say that again. When you are triggered...

Megan: When you think about when we are triggered, our own needs really take over as opposed to being able to provide for the needs of the other person and when that’s your client if you are a therapist, or when that’s a child or student in your classroom, that’s a problem.
Ken: Right.

Megan: That when I went deeper into the attachment research, one big finding really stuck out for me. The goal is to really bring more secure attachment within the school. How do we do that? Is we want to develop in educators, all the qualities you would see in a secure attachment figure.

So like I said, we teach them the science, which is for them the skills but what else contributes to our ability to be a secure attachment figure? Well, research shows that one of the most important contributing factor is our own attachment histories. If we had secure attachments in our past, we are more likely to behave in ways that build secure attachments with others. If we had few secure attachments in our past, we are more likely to behave in ways that builds insecure attachment in others. But, there is one extremely important exception to this rule which is that when adults become aware, when we build what the literature calls "the coherent narrative of our lives" - making sense of how our early relationships impacted us as adults, from children to adults - then regardless of our relationship history, we develop what’s called an earned secure attachment. We become securely attached and we can build secure attachments with others.

And that is exactly why I truly believe that this personal development approach to professional development, utilizing therapists, really, willing to work in one-on-one settings with teachers, helps them increase in their own security of attachment: is the only way we can bring more secure attachment into schools.

Ken: Okay. Well, let’s see. There’s also a critical piece of support in your model; small groups support, one-on-one support for the classroom teacher. Tell me about that, why?

Megan: So that’s essentially what we were discussing just now. We utilize the therapists to provide small groups and one-on-one support. The reason for that is because first of all, on the first level of it is that teaching is emotionally demanding. Being an educator is an extremely interpersonally and emotionally demanding profession.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: So far we’ve had a lot of instructional support for teachers. But I hear from principals all the time that when they go and coach teachers, 90% of it is the teacher really letting out all of those emotions, that are building up inside. So we are not actually doing instructional support during instructional time because things are kind of squeaking out of the cracks basically because we don’t have a proper system to support teachers emotionally.
The other piece of it, the people piece really relates to how we try to make a societal change through this work, is the fact that if we want securely attached kids - with secure attachment as you know correlates with tons of positive outcomes across the board - they need a secure attachment figures, and unfortunately they might not have that at home, teachers are spending more time with students than even the best parents can at times.

Ken: Yeah, yeah.

Megan: And so we need to make sure that our teachers and just great at content and great at pedagogy. They need to be emotionally healthy, emotionally available, emotionally present, able to build secure attachments.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: Now again, the research says even if you didn’t have a secure attachment in your past, you can build secure attachments with others by becoming securely attached.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: How do you become securely attached? Getting an awareness of your own history, then you can experience subsequent secure relationships. And so that’s what one-on-one small groups do.

Ken: I see.

Megan: We use counselors who are trained to build essentially secure attachments with these... With our educators and also help them explore their own emotional history, their own emotional timeline and how it relates to the way they interact in their day-to-day professional and personal lives so they can ultimately be secure attachment figures to kids.

Ken: You bet! Okay so I get the abstract discussion. It makes sense. Do you have any examples of this? I’m just wondering if you have seen this play out with teachers that you worked with or where there are secure or insecure attachment was really clearly obvious in the classroom?

Megan: Sure, sure. And we also work with administrators so the idea that is coming to mind is an administrator that we’ve worked with.

Ken: Okay.

Megan: This administrator became really aware through the workshop what were their triggers, and how that was impacting their well-being. So they were coming to a point when they...
started the Fuel Ed, they had been in the education for many years and they were starting to feel a little bit burnt out, they couldn’t really address or pinpoint what it was.

Through working together with one-on-one, they became aware of how their own attachment style was playing into that.

Ken: Huh!

Megan: The other one was this educator, that grew up in a family where he was kind of constantly praised for whatever he did, but never really quite felt safe, never felt that he could really bring his true self and his true emotion and his needs to the table in the relationship.

Ken: Okay.

Megan: And so what would happen is that he would not share his needs with anyone. And that led to this incredible feeling of burnout and burden on him. On top of that, as a school leader, because there was little room or space for his needs to be heard as a child, he couldn’t really... He didn’t have a high tolerance for hearing the needs and emotions of his staff, his educators. And so that impacted the school culture.

And so through working with one-on-one, he began practicing expressing himself with his first therapist and then ultimately doing it with people in his life felt safe with.

What this ultimately led to was this experience where he called his entire school assembly and said, “We are not going to jump in and problem solve because that’s what we always do. We are going to just create a space for people to share what they are experiencing and to listen.” And so from going from someone who is so afraid to share his own needs and had such difficulty hearing other people’s needs to the complete other end of the spectrum opening up a space in the school for genuine communication and empathy.

That’s sort of the journey that educators can go on when you do this work and delve a little bit deeper.

Ken: Yeah, very powerful. Thank you, that’s what makes it come alive for me so I appreciate that very much.

Megan: Yeah, definitely.

Ken: Our listeners are very concerned with children who experience adverse childhood experiences. You and I both know of ACES, Adverse Childhood Experience Study, in other words trauma, developmental trauma. And in fact I would really refer our
listeners to that. You can type in A-C-E-S and the word “trauma” and you would find all kinds of things in a Google search so you can certainly do that.

How does the Fuel Ed’s schools’ program specifically help those children who have a high ACES score?

Megan: Well I think it comes back down to the science of the relationship. If teachers don’t even know that a thing called attachment exists and kids in their class are acting in a way that is completely normal for child with for example disorganized attachment, avoidance attachment, anxious attachment, whatever it might be. A teacher may then classify that as anything such as "just not being compliant", "being disrespectful" ...

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: Maybe they have an "attention disorder", they are a "bad kid", without really understanding that those kids are actually trying to get their needs met in the best way they learned how.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: That behavior was actually very adaptive to that child in their first environment. And now when the child becomes of age to go to school and they are in a classroom and there are different norms, expectations and even perhaps a secure attachment figure, in the teacher, that behavior is understood, it becomes maladaptive.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: The teacher gets angry, they get sent to the office, they are classified as "uncooperative", "unmotivated". So for teachers who can understand, that’s a common pitfall and to try to truly understand what is this child’s behavior communicating to me, not only who they are but their relationship needs.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: And so I think it’s just the conceptualization, knowing that this is out there, knowing that this is what they are working with and that through repeated connection with the child, repeatedly make them feel as Dan Siegel says, the Four S’s of Secure Attachment: safe, soothe, secure and seen, that that relational bridge can be repaired. That we can actually change a child attachment style and create a completely different life outcome for them.

Ken: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. All right, what about the whole school? So how does Fuel Ed’s school program help the whole school become trauma sensitive?
Megan: That’s a great question. I think there are different ways that Fuel Ed helps the entire school. Aside from the trauma piece, just simply building relationships amongst the team of the school, creates incredible changes, teachers are often isolated in a classroom for hours with little time to connect.

Small groups really offer educators an opportunity to share their experiences, recognize commonalities and their feelings about work and those deeper relationships formed in small groups translated into improved working relationships, greater openness, trust, collaboration. And often times, the teachers got their practical needs met because they have an opportunity to voice them in a productive way because of the school leadership in a small group.

And so just to take a moment to think about this, the teacher in the classroom is the secure attachment figure to the students but if you zoom out to a level of the school, that principle is a secure attachment figure to the teachers. So kind of creating that tribe in the school, creating a place where it’s not just focused on teacher-student relationships, but the relationships among colleagues and the relationships amongst the principal and the staff, it really changes the whole culture, the whole dynamics.

Ken: Yeah, I believe that.

Megan: In terms of being able to serve children who have experienced trauma, giving educators a vocabulary has been shown to be very liberating for them. They can understand human behavior in a new light. They can talk about different approaches, as you said, it can provide that child with more empathy.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: These are things that unfortunately aren’t taught in educator preparation and the teachers want so badly to help kids. No one goes into it for any other reason but the passion they feel to make a difference, to change the lives of students and just giving this extra toolkit, they are lit on fire and they are so excited about being able to recognize new patterns and having the tools to use in terms of building relationships.

Ken: Yeah, All right. It seems that a big push if I’m getting it right, just make sure I am conceptualizing correctly. Fuel Ed is trying to create understanding that so much of what goes wrong in classrooms is about teachers and administrators personalizing, feeling a personal attack by kids that are struggling with trauma and acting out in ways that seem so strange to them but once they understand what’s driving that and that it’s not personal this child is doing the best that he or she can, that that alone does a lot to change the atmosphere. Am I on it?
Megan: That’s absolutely one large piece of it. Gaining a better understanding would be the first step and actually the science of the relationships.

The next step I would say, the skill of relationships, that will help you understand how can you build a relationship with this child that will really change their life, a reparative relationship.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: And then the final piece like I mentioned is the self-awareness. Unfortunately we can’t even access those skills nor does the understanding, better understanding of the child and the scientific relationship really matter if we are blocked in our own kind of development and growth, if we are not aware of the way that for example, I was ashamed and how does that really create this ripple effect of how I then shame others? The expectations I place on myself become expectations, that self-critical voice, that self-critical voice becomes the other critical voice or helplessness in other people, really, really triggers me. Why?

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: What’s that about for me? Understanding my own attachment is really going to be the doorway, the final doorway to creating lasting change.

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: So those are kind of the three different pieces.

Ken: All right. What’s been the reception like? I’m sure you can tell me much that’s positive, I would like to hear about that. Let’s finish it with that.

Megan: Okay.

Ken: Has there been any resistance, said things to overcome relative to that in terms of reaction?

Megan: Oh yes. Tons of things to overcome. We are a new organization. We are entering a third-year right now and we’ve gone from a pilot with 60 teachers to growth to about 600 teachers and we started up here in Houston Texas.

So we’ve done a lot of learning and changing both along the way. I think that there are some systemic challenges with implementing this work in terms of our education system...time...there is not enough time in the day - let alone a FuelEd professional development relationship - but to build relationships sometimes. The factory model of education where you have 40 kids in a room and the teacher is up their delivering the
content, pouring it into their brains, that doesn’t really allow space for the teacher to sit and conceptualize every student and every attachment style, and every need and we get that pushback.

So that’s sort of one thing that I think is a challenge. How can we really change not just adding a new training, but really rethinking schools so that relationships are the focal point. I think that’s the greatest challenge.

Ken: You had successes though overcoming that so tell me about that. How has it gone well and does it usually go well?

Megan: Well I think it goes well with those educators who are really bought in, really motivated. You have to really want to do this work because like I have mentioned, it is a personal development approach to professional development. This is not a professional development experience that a school can say, “I want all my teachers doing this.”

Ken: Yeah.

Megan: Because not everyone feels comfortable with that. Not everyone wants to go into a counseling session and think about how then are past impacts the way they form relationships with people in their personal lives and professional lives.

So those who are really, really eager and motivated, that is when it really works, really beautifully and we see... It’s very gratifying because we see it changing folks lives and, of course, it’s a ripple effect in their whole human being so it’s affecting their personal lives as well.

Ken: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So what are your plans and your hopes moving forward?

Megan: So our hopes are to really grow nationally, to many cities across the US. But our long-term vision is that this type of work is a part of the way we recruit, train, care, support teachers.

We focus now on working with individual schools but we've begun partnering with teacher preparation programs who recognize this as a need, who see this as the missing piece. And we're excited to continue to find additional University or alternative certification and training programs for educators who similarly see the power of their relationship and the need for greater preparation around the social-emotional and relational piece of teaching and learning.

Ken: Yeah. How are you funded? Where is the bulk of that coming from?
Megan: That’s a great question. We are funded partially from earned revenues through the school system that pay for our program and partially through philanthropies. We have been very fortunate, to our donors here in the Houston area and beyond.

Ken: Fantastic! If folks want to help out, with what you are doing, how would they do that?

Megan: Well, we would love for you to come and visit our website. You can visit us at www.fueledschools.org and get in touch with us, donate, get involved, volunteer, spread the word, we would love to hear from you.

Ken: All right. What else is on your site? What can they learn about your work from there?

Megan: On our website, you can see more about the research foundation of Fuel Ed, the social neuroscience of education. There is a piece written by Dr. Cozolino about how FuelEd really sprung from the research we did together on that book. And so that’s exciting to see how really what we are doing connects to the social neuroscience and the psychology behind all of this.

Ken: All right. Well fantastic! Megan, thank you very much for joining us today.

Megan: My pleasure!

Ken: I am excited about a number of the things that you were saying. I wrote down just a couple of quotes, “All learning and growth happens on the stage of a relationship.” And, “Relational trauma can only be healed relationally.” I just really appreciate some of those ideas and thank you very much for your time.

Megan: Absolutely! Thank you Ken.

Ken: All right. This is Dr. Ken Huey with ATN’s Educating Traumatized Children Summit. This is one of over 20 interviews that are part of this summit.

If you’d like a complete set of all the recordings from this summit or set of recordings or transcripts, you can visit our website, you can purchase them there and they will be able to download at the end of the summit.

You can get more information at www.attachu.org/events/summit. Attach U is A-T-T-A-C-H-U.

At ATN, we are committed to helping traumatized children and their families. If you’d like to learn more about the support education and advocacy we provide, please visit our main site at www.attachtrauma.org.

Thank you for tuning in today and please join us again for our other interviews.
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