

Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning impacts both students and teachers. This paper provides an overview of social and emotional learning by defining it, tracing its history, differentiating it from similar concepts and discussing future directions for research. Social and emotional learning was found to have a positive impact on students' lives. Future directions of research include better understanding of how it relates to social justice and teachers' knowledge and experiences.

Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Humans are complex creatures. Our psychological, social and emotional domains interact with one another and impact our lives in a variety of ways (Jones & Kahn, 2017). As an elementary teacher, I know my students cannot learn if they do not feel well physically *and* emotionally. If they do not possess social skills, then their interaction with one another, group projects and even recess turn sour. Alternatively, by improving my students' social and emotional skills, I have found them to be happier alone, happier with others and able to focus on their academics.

The role of social and emotional learning in schools is not limited to my experience. Research has found that social and emotional learning, or SEL, plays a positive role in students' lives (Blewitt et al., 2018; CASEL, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Goldberg et al., 2019; Korpershoek, Harms, de Boer, van Kuijk, & Doolaard, 2016; Moorman Kim, Park, Sheridan, Smith, & Beretvas, 2019). Therefore, the goal of this paper is to better understand SEL in schools. First, this paper will course the history of SEL and define it. Second, it will differentiate it from similar concepts, such as character education and mental health. Third, this paper will discuss components of effective SEL. Finally, this paper will discuss important topics for future discussion.

History

According to Lickona (1993), the historic purposes of school were to teach children to become smart and good. Accordingly, schools in the early days of the United States utilized The Bible, poems, exhortations and heroic tales to teach children proper values and morals. Children learned lessons of kindness, patriotism, thriftiness, and so on. Though teaching values and morals eventually waned in popularity, and The Bible was no longer required in public

schooling, teaching children to be ‘good’ re-emerged in the 1990s, albeit with a different name: character education (Lickona, 1993). In 1993, the Character Education Partnership was launched with a goal to prioritize character development in public education (Lickona, 1993). A variety of character education programs arose, and in 1997, President Clinton mentioned character education in his State of the Union Address (Elias, Zins, & Weissberg, 1997).

Interestingly, during the years that character education surged in popularity, a similar program emerged. According to The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, in 1994 the term “social and emotional learning” developed from a meeting of child advocates, researchers and educators that were interested in childhood development (CASEL, 2019). There was a large effort by SEL advocates to promote social and emotional learning over character education (Elias et al., 1997). Character education focuses on knowing and acting upon social values such as fairness, honesty, compassion, responsibility and respect (Elias et al., 1997). Alternatively, social and emotional learning involves both social *and* psychological aspects, which include self-awareness, self-management, and so on (Denham, Ji, & Hamre, 2010). Thus, according to Elias and Zins (1997), it is possible to assume that social and emotional learning provides a broader focus than character education.

It is important to define exactly what is social and emotional learning. According to CASEL, which created the term, SEL involves the processes of developing social and emotional competencies in children (CASEL, 2019). There are five competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2012). Theoretically speaking, it is possible to think of the five competencies as developing in parallel. Alternatively, it may be that they build upon one another. First, self-management is a cognitive skill which includes the executive functions of the brain, such as attention control,

flexibility, inhibition and planning (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Afterward, self-awareness and social awareness are emotional competencies, which involve how to recognize ones' own and others' emotions (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Third, relationship skills allow one to read social cues and successfully navigate social situations (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Finally, responsible decision making comes when one is able to correctly navigate all previous steps. Regardless of the details of social and emotional competencies – whether they emerge in tandem or one by one – SEL deserves focus because, just as Elias and Zins (1997) suggested, it focuses on both the social *and* emotional aspects of childhood development.

Connection with Mental Health

More than 50% of lifetime mental health disorders develop by early adolescence (Thomson et al., 2019). Strategies to promote children's positive mental health include developing safe, caring and supportive environments, as well as providing direct instruction for students on skills and strategies (Collaborative for Academic, S. and E. L., & Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2008). It just so happens that supportive environments, as well as skills and strategies, are key components of both mental health promotion and SEL. Therefore, while it does not replace the need for comprehensive mental health systems, SEL can provide support for children's mental health.

Theory Behind Social and Emotional Learning

According to social constructivism, people learn from one another through observation, imitation and modeling (Bandura, 1977). Thus children can learn social behavior (Soto-Icaza, Aboitiz, & Billeke, 2015) and emotional patterns (Hoemann, Xu, & Barrett, 2019) by observing other people through social interaction and by imitating what they see. However, for children to cultivate *positive* social and emotional skills, adults should teach these skills explicitly, model

their use and allow children to practice using them (Gresham, 1981). In school settings, teachers can teach social and emotional skills through explicit instruction and integration into academic curricula and instructional practices (CASEL, 2012).

Age to Learn SEL

While children are social creatures from a very young age, the need to develop social skills starts in preschool, during which children begin to spend time with adults outside of the home and socialize with their peers (CASEL, 2012). As children grow, somewhere between the ages of 6 and 10, they are even more ready to learn social and emotional skills (Melnick & Martinez, 2019). These are the years when children are developing their sense of self, abstract thinking and social relationships (Melnick & Martinez, 2019). Even if children are deprived from explicit learning of social and emotional skills at a younger age, it is still possible to learn them later in life, such as during high school and beyond (CASEL, 2012). Based on concepts of brain plasticity, human genes interact with experiences so that as people learn new things, they can acquire new abilities (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Effective Social-Emotional Programs

To be most effective, the teaching of social and emotional skills should be well sequenced, active, focused and explicit (Durlak et al., 2011). That is, the teaching should take place regularly, be focused on social and emotional skills and provide children with active participation and practice opportunities. CASEL's 2012 report provides a list of 23 evidence-based programs for teaching SEL in schools. These programs were found to have a significantly positive impact on areas such as academic performance, social behavior, conduct and emotional stress. The programs are not identical, suggesting that there is not *one* way to teach social and emotional skills. For example, some effective programs teach only social and

emotional skills, while others teach SEL with other topics such as character education and substance abuse prevention (CASEL, 2012). Some effective programs integrate SEL into other academic areas, and some programs promote social and emotional learning at home, while others do not. Finally, effective programs vary in the number of lessons and activities planned for the students. However, what unites all the effective programs, according to CASEL (2012), is that they are explicit, take place regularly and provide students with opportunities to practice social and emotional skills.

Benefits of Social-Emotional Learning

According to a survey of teachers, 90% showed a strong support for schools increasing their focus on SEL (Melnick & Martinez, 2019). Teachers' strong support for SEL is not surprising, given the various benefits associated with it. First, SEL helps children to adjust to school through improved peer relationships, less conduct problems and less emotional distress (CASEL, 2012). This finding is supported by meta-analysis of early childhood social-emotional programs, which found that children exposed to an SEL intervention showed significant improvement in social competence, emotional competence and self-regulation (Blewitt et al., 2018). An earlier meta-analysis confirms this finding, showing that compared to a control group, students receiving SEL significantly improved in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Second, SEL may provide a strong foundation for students' improved academic performance (CASEL, 2012). One reason for the connection between SEL and academics is found in the theory that the major parts of human development – social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic and academic – are all intertwined (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Accordingly, strengths or weaknesses in one area impact the others. A 2016 meta-analysis studied 54 classroom

management interventions and found that programs targeting students' social-emotional development had the strongest effect on academic outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Therefore, they suggested that when a teacher is choosing which classroom management strategy to utilize, they should choose one that focuses on students' social-emotional development. Other research that supports the connection between social and emotional learning and academic achievement includes Durlak et al., (2011), which found that, compared to the control, children receiving an SEL intervention reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement.

According to CASEL, for an a SEL program to be impactful, it is advised that it operates within a school-wide system (2012). This is because school-wide systems and procedures can impact a child's development directly (Bear, 2010). According to a meta-analysis of whole-school social and emotional programs, there was a small but significant improvement in participants' social and emotional adjustment, behavioral adjustment and internalizing symptoms (Goldberg et al., 2019). However, the programs were not shown to impact academic achievement. Bridging SEL from school to home can also be beneficial. Another meta-analysis found significant effects of school-to-home SEL interventions on children's social-behavioral competence and mental health (Moorman Kim et al., 2019).

Teachers and Social-Emotional Learning

Teachers are usually the ones who implement social and emotional learning in their classrooms, either through direct instruction or through their classroom management strategies (Durlak et al., 2011). It is important to understand the relationship that teachers have with social-emotional learning and teaching for two main reasons. First, teachers' knowledge, views and own social-emotional skills will impact their teaching effectiveness. Second, teachers' personal lives are impacted by their own social and emotional skills.

Teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward SEL impact how effectively they teach these skills in their classrooms (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Furthermore, teachers' own social-emotional skills impact their academic teaching effectiveness. For example, a meta-analysis of 25 studies found that teaching effectiveness is positively impacted by a teachers' personality traits of conscientiousness and emotional stability. Although these two terms are not exactly social-emotional verbiage, they are closely linked (Kim, Joerg, & Klassen, n.d.).

Students are not the only ones who benefit from emotional intelligence. In fact, various studies have found a significant positive connection between teacher emotional intelligence and their job satisfaction (Mohamad & Jais, 2016; Solari, Brackett, Palomera, Majska-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010) and a negative association between emotional intelligence and teacher burnout (Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017). Although this section has briefly touched upon the importance of teachers in SEL, much more research can be conducted in the future. Studies have been recently published which analyze the relationship between teachers and SEL (Cross Francis, Liu, Bharaj, & Eker, 2019; De Ruiter, Poorthuis, & Koomen, 2019; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2019; McLean, Eklund, Kilgus, & Burns, n.d.; Menzies et al., 2020).

Connection with Social Justice

Social and emotional learning works as a preventative measure. Through increased self-management and self-awareness skills, children are able to make more responsible decisions and have fewer conduct problems (CASEL, 2012). Given that black students and male students are more likely to be suspended or expelled for behavioral issues, attention has been given to the role that SEL may play in helping to reduce racial disparity (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). On one hand, SEL may reduce racial injustice because it prevents discipline issues. On the other hand, SEL may be too 'colorblind' to help reduce racial inequality in discipline, especially since SEL

often does not target teachers' racial bias (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). As with the connection between teachers and SEL, more time can be given to better analyze the role of SEL and social justice. Recently, a variety of scholarly articles have been published this issue (Evanovich, Martinez, Kern, & Haynes, 2020; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2019; Naser et al., 2020; Raval, Montañez, Meyer, & Berger-Jenkins, 2019).

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has met its objective to serve as an overview and introduction of social and emotional learning in schools. First, this paper differentiated between social and emotional learning and related concepts of character education and mental health. Second, this paper discussed the origins of social and emotional learning and defined it as an amalgam of five constructs. Third, effective SEL learning and programs were discussed. Finally, this paper gave an overview of two areas worth further study: the relationship between SEL and teachers, and the relationship between SEL and social justice. These two areas are of special interest to the author, given her role as a teacher of children whose daily lives are impacted by social injustice.

Some SEL topics have not been discussed by this paper. These include the connection between SEL and special needs inclusion (Davies, Elliott, Frey, & Cooper, n.d.; Menzies et al., 2020); the rates of school implementation (Briesch et al., 2019); the role of family-school partnership (Smith, Sheridan, Kim, Park, & Beretvas, n.d.); SEL in gifted education (Wiley, 2020); and SEL internationally (Torrente et al., 2019). All of these areas are worthy of study. However, given her desire to improve the lives of her students, the author of this paper has decided to focus her next paper on better understanding what she as a teacher can do to better support students' social and emotional learning.

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