

Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue

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# Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue

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*Stephanie M. Jones and Emily J. Doolittle*

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**R**esearch increasingly suggests that social and emotional learning (SEL) matters a great deal for important life outcomes like success in school, college entry and completion, and later earnings. This research also tells us that SEL can be taught and nurtured in schools so that students increase their ability to integrate thinking, emotions, and behavior in ways that lead to positive school and life outcomes. Although the term *social and emotional learning* has been around for 20 years, we've recently seen a rapid surge in interest in SEL among parents, educators, and policymakers. For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is supporting 10 large school districts and 45 smaller ones through its Collaborating Districts Initiative as they begin to incorporate a variety of SEL programs and practices into their schools. CASEL also recently launched a Collaborating States Initiative to support states as they develop policies, standards, and guidelines for SEL in schools. All 50 states have SEL standards in place at the preschool level, and four (Illinois, Kansas, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania) have SEL standards for kindergarten through 12th

grade. And the Aspen Institute recently launched a National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development to explore how schools can fully integrate SEL into policies and instruction that have traditionally emphasized academics. We also know that teachers believe SEL skills can be taught, although they may not always know the best way to do so in their classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

## **What's in a Name?**

SEL goes by many other names. Common terms for this set of skills include character education, personality, 21st-century skills, soft skills, and noncognitive skills, just to name a few. Each label draws from a slightly different theoretical perspective and draws upon a different set of research, and each has its own related fields and disciplines. In this issue of *Future of Children*, we call the domain *social and emotional learning* for two reasons. First, recent market research indicates that this is a familiar and preferred term among policymakers, practitioners, and parents.<sup>2</sup> Second, the term emphasizes learning and growth—providing a more positive framing than terms like noncognitive or soft skills. By emphasizing learning and growth, the term SEL is

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also consistent with schools' fundamental mission to support academic learning and engaged citizenship.

But what are we talking about when it comes to SEL? Researchers, educators, and policymakers alike have trouble pinning down exactly what's included in this broad domain—and what isn't. The popular press has highlighted a wide array of skills, such as grit, empathy, growth mindset, social skills, and more. At its core, SEL involves children's ability to learn about and manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and others, and that help children and youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship.<sup>3</sup> To effectively manage emotions and social interactions requires a complex interplay of cognitive skills, such as attention and the ability to solve problems; beliefs about the self, such as perceptions of competence and autonomy; and social awareness, including empathy for others and the ability to resolve conflicts. The SEL skills that have been identified are vast in number and varied in nature, and they stem from many different yet complementary theoretical perspectives. This diversity has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it has pushed researchers and practitioners to search for the best ways to support healthy development and positive life outcomes. On the other hand, it has complicated our understanding of the domain.

Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, interest in SEL has exploded over the past few years. That's why we decided to produce an issue of *Future of Children* that focuses on developing SEL skills in our schools. The articles published here collectively address developmental

changes and intervention approaches from preschool through secondary school, as well as the related out-of-school context of after-school programming and major policy issues in education like teacher preparation, school discipline, and school-based assessment for intervention and accountability purposes.

### **Why This Issue on Social and Emotional Learning?**

We are at a crossroads for SEL theory, research, and practice. Much has already been written on SEL, and it's not our intention to duplicate that work.<sup>4</sup> Rather, we wanted to put together a set of articles that review the available evidence and lay bare some of the contradictions that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are facing.

The recent expansion in popular interest in SEL coexists with what might best be called a healthy skepticism about teaching social and emotional skills in schools. Despite considerable research suggesting that SEL is a vital component of academic achievement and later success in life, various stakeholders hold divergent and often incompatible views as to how or even whether SEL skills should be explicitly taught in schools. To further complicate matters, the existing evidence is somewhat conflicting: some studies find that interventions designed to teach and support SEL skills have positive effects, and others don't; some students seem to benefit more than others. This issue of *Future of Children* examines the state of the science when it comes to SEL intervention and assessment, while also tackling important policy issues in education. The eight articles are intended to help shed light on how best to support SEL in schools and to explore how SEL in schools might impact important policy questions in education.

To say social and emotional *learning* implies that these competencies can be learned and nurtured. Some of the articles discuss what we know about interventions to support SEL skills, assessment of SEL skills, and policy to support SEL skill development at different levels of schooling, from preschool to high school. The articles consider how SEL skills are typically cultivated in schools and how school-based intervention may need to differ depending on the demands of the developmental period in question (early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence). Because teachers are at the center of the work of schools, we include an article on the role teachers play in supporting students' SEL skills and how teachers' own SEL skills affect this process. Finally, we also consider out-of-school time contexts—specifically, after-school programs that are linked to the school context—and their role in promoting SEL skills.

### How Did We Get Here?

Decades' worth of research suggests that something other than academic skills and content knowledge strongly influences success in school and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, SEL skills may be just as important as academic or purely cognitive skills for understanding how people succeed in school, college, and careers. In addition, preliminary evidence suggests that SEL skills could be central to understanding and remediating stubbornly persistent gaps in achievement defined by income and racial/ethnic differences.<sup>6</sup> But research has also found a great deal of variation in what works, for whom, and under what conditions. Many factors likely contribute to that variation. For example, different disciplines have produced a great many frameworks and organizational systems that describe and define social

and emotional skills.<sup>7</sup> Looking across these organizing systems, frameworks from different disciplines refer to the same skill or competency by different names, or use the same name to refer to two conceptually distinct skills.<sup>8</sup> Frameworks also vary in the type of construct they aim to describe—from skills, behaviors, and attitudes to traits, strengths, and abilities—making it difficult to distill and compare discrete concepts across them. Two examples of different ways to conceptualize SEL help to highlight these differences and the implications for assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

The first framework, from CASEL, organizes important SEL skills into five types of competencies: *self-awareness*—the ability to identify one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and understand how they guide behavior; *self-management*—the ability to successfully regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations, and to set and work toward goals; *social awareness*—the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, and to understand social and ethical norms for behavior; *relationship skills*—the ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed; and *responsible decision-making*—the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms.<sup>9</sup>

Compare that to the framework developed by Stephanie Jones (one of the editors of this issue), which organizes SEL competencies into three types rather than five: *cognitive regulation*—the ability to focus attention, plan, solve problems,

coordinate behavior, make choices among competing alternatives, and override a preferred response in favor of a more appropriate one; *emotional processes*—the ability to recognize, express, and regulate one's own emotions and understand the emotions of others; and *social and interpersonal skills*—the ability to accurately interpret other people's behavior, effectively navigate social situations, and interact positively with peers and adults. Different conceptual frameworks can lead to different research questions, different intervention approaches, and different choices for measurement in evaluation. Conceptual variation has produced some of the challenges in making sense of the evidence about SEL. In this issue, we don't adhere to a single conceptual framework. Instead, the articles here are guided by different theoretical frameworks that shed light on a number of important themes.

### Research to Practice

The articles in this issue reveal the various theoretical frameworks that guide intervention and assessment of SEL skills from preschool through high school. What does that variation imply? First, it may be a source of sometimes contradictory and perhaps less than compelling findings. Lack of precision with respect to core SEL competencies and how to measure them makes it harder to translate research findings into beneficial practices to support SEL in schools. For example, as we said above, conceptual frameworks from different disciplines may refer to the same skill or competency with different names, use the same name to refer to two conceptually distinct skills, or describe different types of constructs.

In an ideal world, we could see a clear link between research findings and how to act on those findings. For example, to help children learn self-control—how to manage their behavior without the aid of a teacher or external incentives (like stickers or other reward systems)—we would want schools to use practices that are supported by research findings. In the CASEL framework, self-control falls squarely in the self-management domain—the ability to successfully regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations, and to set and work toward goals. In Jones's framework, self-control is at play in two of the three domains—cognitive regulation, which involves the ability to focus attention, make choices among competing alternatives, and override a preferred response in favor of a more appropriate one, and emotional processes, which include the ability to regulate one's own emotions. The two frameworks have common features when it comes to self-control: both reference emotion regulation and cognitive regulation. To what extent do these different frameworks for measuring and intervening to promote something like self-control make a difference in practice? And to what extent does the use of different frameworks in research and evaluation underlie some of the contradictory evidence?

### Making the Case

This issue focuses on the role that schools and similar organized settings (after-school programs) play in supporting SEL skills. We chose this focus for several reasons. First, although other factors like family and neighborhood are also important to SEL skill development, we wanted to understand how schools and other organized settings

can support SEL skills. That's important because research suggests that SEL skills are malleable, meaning they can be taught and learned. SEL programs in schools may be designed to change student SEL skills and competencies in any of three ways: by teaching students specific SEL skills through direct instruction using a specific curriculum; by altering the school environment (often referred to as school or classroom climate), through teachers' practices and their style of interaction with students, or by changing school rules and expectations; or by influencing students' mindsets—that is, their perceptions of themselves, others, and the environments they experience. Second, interest in SEL has advanced rapidly, and we saw a need to get a handle on the important issues now so that we can progress in an organized fashion and clarify what the different conceptualizations and contradictory research findings mean for both research and practice. Third, despite growing interest in SEL and ways to promote it in schools, SEL remains disconnected from important school policies like discipline practices, assessment for intervention and accountability purposes, and teacher professional development.

The first article lays out a framework for considering the role of schools and related settings in supporting SEL skill development. Mark Greenberg, Celene Domitrovich, Roger Weissberg, and Joseph Durlak argue that promoting SEL in schools is essential because of its potential to support more general public health goals. They make the case that SEL can support a public health approach to education (that is, both prevent problems and promote positive outcomes) for three reasons. First, schools are good places to intervene to

ensure a healthy population because most children spend a large part of their lives there. Second, school-based SEL programs can both improve students' SEL skills and academic achievement, and reduce the likelihood that they'll experience behavioral or emotional problems in the future. Third, SEL programs in all schools for all students (universal interventions) can have a substantial impact on public health because of the "prevention paradox," which states that overall public health is best achieved in the long run by providing intervention to all rather than targeted intervention only to those who are most in need of additional support. That's because most cases of any undesirable outcome arise in the large segment of the population that's considered to be at low risk.

## **State of the Science**

Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, and Durlak set the stage for the next set of articles, which explore whether SEL is teachable and what schools (and out-of-school programs) can do to support and nurture SEL in students. Collectively, these four articles describe the state of the science on SEL interventions across different levels of schooling—preschool (Megan McClelland, Shauna Tominey, Sara Schmitt, and Robert Duncan), elementary school (Stephanie Jones, Sophie Barnes, Rebecca Bailey, and Emily Doolittle), and middle and high school (David Yeager), and in after-school programs (Noelle Hurd and Nancy Deutsch). As the core of this issue of *Future of Children*, they ask the following questions: How are SEL skills defined and typically cultivated in schools and related settings? What have we learned from intervention and prevention about their role in learning? What SEL

strategies and practices are effective? Do the effects of SEL programs and practices vary depending on children's socio-demographic background, race/ethnicity, or gender? What are the primary challenges to integrating a focus on SEL into educational practice?

These articles describe different types of research studies but focus primarily on studies that offer the strongest evidence that a given SEL program—rather than other factors that weren't measured or controlled for—led to specific outcomes for students.

Each state-of-the-science article considers what the research tells us about the best ways to support SEL skill development in different developmental periods (early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence) and different settings (school or after school). At first glance, the evidence they review may appear equivocal. But three themes link them together: child development, alignment, and the role of adults.

### Developmental Period

SEL interventions seem to be most effective when the program content and method of delivery are developmentally appropriate. That observation may seem simplistic (and incredibly obvious), but three important principles lie behind it. First, neurological and physical changes dictate which SEL skills are most important at a given developmental stage and when mastery should be achieved. Consider the example of emotional skills and competencies. From early childhood into middle childhood and adolescence, we see a gradual shift from the ability to recognize and name different emotional

states (what does an angry face look like, and how is anger different from or similar to sadness?) to understanding that different people can have different emotional reactions to the same objective situation because of their own personal experiences and preferences (I feel angry when X happens but my best friend feels sad). In other words, the set of skills broadens over time, and some early skills serve as the foundation for later skills—you must understand what emotions are and what they look like when experienced before you can even begin to understand that events don't evoke the same emotions in all people. Second, children experience broader and more diverse environments as they grow older, and out-of-home environments become more influential. During the preschool years, children spend much of their time at home with parents and siblings or at school with their teachers and classmates. By middle childhood, the family slowly becomes less central as children encounter more teachers and classmates and spend more time in other contexts, such as sports teams, clubs, and friends' homes. By adolescence, the peer context broadens further. Teenagers go to larger schools with multiple teachers and have several different sets of peers; they may also have part-time jobs or participate in other, more far-reaching activities. Third, the method of intervention delivery must be appropriate to a child's developmental level. In preschool, play-based programs seem to be most effective (or at least seem the most promising). In middle childhood, didactic teaching with embedded classroom-based activities to promote practice of SEL skills seems to be the best approach. In adolescence, intervention must account for adolescents' point of view and need for autonomy and respect as they transition to adulthood.

## **Alignment between Targets and Outcomes**

No matter the stage of development, the research evidence may be less inconsistent than a first look indicates. All four of these articles suggest that apparently contradictory findings may instead be artifacts of misalignment between the targets of SEL intervention and the student outcomes that were measured. For example, many SEL interventions are designed to teach very specific social or emotional skills, yet they measure outcomes that are much broader, such as attendance or academic achievement—or they assess a broad range of SEL skills, only some of which were directly targeted by the program.

## **Adults Are Important**

No matter when in children's lives an SEL program is implemented, the adults delivering the program (or simply present in the environment) are important to its success. In early childhood, teachers need professional development to support their implementation of SEL programs. In middle childhood, all the adults involved in the program need professional development and other support, because SEL interventions at this level can be targeted not just at the classroom but also at the whole school. For adolescents, SEL programs may be more effective if they're delivered by adults who show that they understand and respect the adolescent's point of view and need for autonomy, rather than trying to control them. In after-school programs, supportive adults who act as mentors are vital. And last, but no less important, if adults lack SEL skills themselves or suffer from stress or poor

physical and mental health, their ability to support their students' SEL may be severely compromised.

## **What Can Policy Do?**

The remaining three articles tackle important policy questions. Together, they provide a broad overview of the policy landscape in relation to SEL, as well as more focused policy perspectives from three areas: teacher professional development and wellbeing, assessment and learning standards, and school discipline policies and practices. These articles ask the following questions: Based on the existing evidence, what are we ready to act on and what policies should we use? What support do teachers get to promote healthy SEL skills in their classrooms? What are the challenges, opportunities, and consequences of SEL assessment? How should SEL standards be used in schools? How is the development of SEL skills linked to school discipline and to disparities in exclusionary discipline practices that remove children from the classroom or school?

In the first policy article, Anne Gregory and Edward Fergus describe the landscape of discipline policy and practices in schools, the well-documented gender and racial disparities in how students are disciplined, and how SEL interventions might help to reduce these disparities. They highlight how local efforts to reduce discipline disparities have incorporated SEL practices, and in doing so have allowed for more developmentally appropriate techniques to support student behavior and thereby reduce the need to suspend or expel students. They also reveal how race- and gender-based equity in discipline requires an expansion of SEL frameworks to consider



the role that adults like teachers and school administrators play in promoting students' SEL. Perhaps most important, they highlight the need to consider the role of culture and societal beliefs about power and privilege.

Because SEL theory and practice seem to put a great deal of emphasis on the individual rather than the environment—and, consequently, put the burden of SEL on students—we next consider the role of teachers in school-based SEL interventions. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl reviews evidence that shows how teachers' own SEL skills and more general wellbeing affect their students' SEL. She also shows that teacher preparation programs largely ignore this aspect of teaching, leaving teachers relatively unprepared to support SEL in their teaching and more general classroom practices.

In the final policy article, Clark McKown looks at how SEL skills are measured, and at what it means to measure SEL skills for the purposes of school accountability and standards. He explores the mismatch between the need to assess SEL for high-stakes accountability and the inappropriateness of existing assessment systems for that purpose. McKown argues that for school-based SEL to achieve

its promise, we need sophisticated test development that meets rigorous scientific and ethical standards. SEL assessments should be usable and feasible in schools, focus on strengths rather than deficits, not interfere with academic instruction, and be able to quickly and flexibly report results so that schools can act on them. And in line with the intervention articles, assessments must be developmentally appropriate, and the methods they use must align with the constructs being measured.

### **What's Next for SEL in Schools?**

The articles in this issue bring to light some tough challenges as we seek to build on our momentum and use SEL interventions to support the best possible outcomes for individual students and for our population more generally. Until we reach consensus about how core SEL competencies are defined, used in research, and translated into education practice (as standards with associated practices and strategies), the issue of terminology and how well it links the evidence, intervention approaches and practices, and evaluation and accountability systems together will remain a problem. Still, the evidence presented here lays important groundwork to move SEL forward.

## ENDNOTES

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