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# Exploring Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning Programs in Schools

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**Exploring Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning Programs in Schools**

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
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Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores different viewpoints on the implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools. Using a literature review approach, information was collected through peer-reviewed and online articles to examine the benefits and potential challenges of SEL programs in promoting students' social and emotional development. The findings reveal that while there is widespread support for SEL programs, there are also concerns about its implementation, effectiveness, and potential unintended consequences. This study contributes to the field by highlighting the need for a more nuanced and critical understanding of SEL programs, and their impact on students as well as insight into objections to program implementation. The primary implication of this research provides insight into objections and cautions against the widescale implementation of SEL programs. Suggested future research could include qualitative data through classroom observations, interviews, and other more systematic ways to understand perspectives about SEL.

Keywords: Educational Psychology, Social and Emotional Learning, SEL, Criticisms of SEL, Early Childhood Education, Education Philosophy

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is motivated by the unexpected discovery of differing viewpoints about Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. In early childhood education, a significant issue is children starting school without the necessary emotional and social skills. These skills have important implications for their success in school and later in life.

However, the current educational system in the US prioritizes academic skills such as reading, math, and science, with minimal attention given to social and emotional development. To address this issue, SEL programs have been implemented on a large scale to support the development of social and emotional skills in children. This need has been heightened due to the pandemic's effects and the resulting social isolation experienced by many children.

Despite the widescale implementation of SEL across the US and the overwhelmingly positive evidence for its effectiveness, there is still debate and objections raised about its implementation. This thesis aims to present and acknowledge diverse perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning, contributing to the ongoing discourse on SEL curriculum and implementation. By understanding various viewpoints on SEL, we can enhance and improve the curriculum. In the next section, I provide background about SEL programs, including defining what is meant by SEL and providing examples of four widely used SEL programs.

### Background about Social and Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning Programs, abbreviated as SEL, are programs that aim to foster social and emotional development in children within an educational environment

(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2022). The concept was first introduced in the 1960s by Yale Medical School's Child Study Center. The educational method was first developed by Professor James P. Comer, who believed that "the relationship between school and family is at the heart of a poor child's success or lack of it" (Goldberg, 1990). He started the Comer School Development Program, which focused on improving children's educational experience and community building for underserved low socioeconomic and ethnic communities that exhibit poor academic achievement. His program was first implemented in two elementary schools in Connecticut serving African American children, and it focused on nurturing the social and emotional needs of minority students to improve academic performance and engagement (Joyner, 2012). His program was eventually dispersed to other schools in Connecticut as well as in other parts of the country. Moreover, studies of schools implementing Comer's School Development Program showed a significant increase in student achievement, attendance, social skills, self-reflection, behavior, and a better outlook on the academic environment compared to schools not using Comer's program (Haynes & Comer, 1990; Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989). Comer's success and development of Social Emotional Learning inspired other researchers to develop their own programs.

In 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), was founded and soon thereafter they began distributing SEL guidelines to schools and educators. At present, CASEL has adopted the Transformative SEL framework that includes teaching children to "critically examine the root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal well-being" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2022). One important contribution of CASEL has been defining 5 key SEL competencies. The CASEL 5 are defined as:

Self-Awareness - Interpreting one's own emotions, thoughts, and personal values and how they translate into social situations;

Self-Management - How one manages their emotions and behaviors and ways to achieve goals;

Responsible Decision-Making - Making reasonable decisions about behavior and social interactions after analyzing personal situations;

Social Awareness - Empathizing and recognizing others' differing perspectives; and-

Relationship Skills - Creating and maintaining healthy and meaningful relationships with others;  
(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2022)

In addition to CASEL's contributions in defining social-emotional skills, they also offer a compendium describing various SEL programs and tools for schools and educators that are explicitly intended to support students' development of behavioral, emotional, and social competencies, self-awareness, and appropriate decision-making skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). Traditionally, emotion teaching was taught at home, but it has become clear that many students are not entering school emotionally competent. This can cause difficulties for young children in school as they are unequipped to cope with their emotions and the emotions of others. (Bierman, 2010). Children spend most of their time in classrooms, making it an ideal setting to teach emotional regulation strategies and provide support to children's social and emotional development (Curby, 2021). The goal of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, then, are to create a safe, and inclusive learning environment in school where students feel valued. This sets children up for success, not only in academics but in their communities as well (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Some examples of SEL programs include Mind Up, Positive Action, Second Step, RULER, and EMOTERS, which are described below.

Mind Up: Founded in 2003 by the Goldie Hawn Foundation, Mind Up emphasizes the importance of mindfulness-based education to teach children stress management, emotion regulation, and resilience. The program focuses on four key elements: neuroscience, social-emotional learning, mindful awareness, and positive psychology (Mind Up, 2023).

Positive Action: This program promotes the idea that positive thoughts lead to positive actions, which lead to greater self-worth, and negative thoughts and actions have the opposite effect. Positive Action uses the Thoughts-Actions-Feelings Circle (TAF) to illustrate this concept and provides seven units, including positive self-concept, healthy body, and mind, managing feelings, treating others with respect, being honest, self-improvement, and reflection. The program also offers additional instruction on topics such as bullying, substance use, counseling, family, and community involvement (Positive Action, 2023).

Second Step: Developed by the non-profit Committee for Children in 1979, Second Step uses a holistic approach to social-emotional learning to teach children listening skills, behavior management, social skills, and engagement. The program is designed for different age levels, from PreK to K-5 and 6-8, and offers additional support programs for anti-bullying and child protection. For example, their early learning curriculum includes weekly units on skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, friendship skills, problem-solving, and transitioning to kindergarten. The goal of their program is to help children set goals and make good decisions, improve confidence, and improve social and friendship skills (Second Step, 2023).

RULER: Established at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, RULER is an SEL program for K-12 students that focuses on Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating Emotions. The program's goal is to help students develop emotional intelligence and create positive learning environments (YCEI, 2022).

EMOTERS: EMOTERS stands for EMOTION TEACHING Rating Scale and is a tool used for measuring emotion-based teaching practices in research, specifically in preschool settings for children aged 3 to 5 years old. While not an SEL program like the others listed, it can be used as a reflection tool for professional and personal development (EMOTERS, 2023).

Effective emotion regulation teaching begins with well-regulated, emotionally intelligent adults (Hoffman, 2020). According to Gross (1998, p.275), emotion regulation involves "the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions." However, most educators are trained to focus on a child's behavior without addressing the emotion behind it, which resolves immediate issues but does not teach students how to identify and control their emotions to prevent future occurrences. Studies show that having knowledge of emotion regulation is positively correlated with academic achievement, improved behavior, and student and teacher well-being (Hoffman, 2020). Furthermore, children who exhibit knowledge in emotion regulation and practice, such as empathy towards their classmates, are more likely to be sought out as playmates and awarded additional positive social interactions among peers (Curby, 2021). Therefore, incorporating SEL into the classroom can have positive effects on children's social and emotional development (Zinsser, 2021).



## What research tells us about Social & Emotional Learning

There is clear and consistent evidence from research studies demonstrating that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs indeed enhance social and emotional skills in children and adults, including their stress management, responsible decision-making, personal well-being, emotional self-awareness, and effective conflict resolution among peers (Belfield, 2015).

As discussed, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has numerous benefits for students' social and emotional development, as well as significant impacts on their academic success and overall well-being. Among students, both short-term and long-term positive outcomes have been shown to result from the implementation of universal SEL programs in schools. Durlak et al. (2018) identified short-term positive outcomes on students' attitudes toward peers and self-worth, and positive long-term outcomes on academic success, improved mental health, and positive behavior. According to Durlak et al. (2011), students' relationship with school, mood, and academic achievement improved after SEL programming. Students who exhibit self-awareness and confidence in their academic competencies tend to persevere during difficult tasks. Furthermore, students who use problem-solving skills, stress management techniques, and goal-setting strategies tend to have better grades and academic performance. This improved academic success also improves student-teacher relationships and school satisfaction, resulting in a more positive classroom environment (Durlak, 2011). Social-Emotional Learning equips students with the necessary skills and confidence to actively participate in their school and community, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose within their respective communities. Belfield (2015) suggests that the promotion of personal growth and self-worth can translate to greater academic success. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is not only beneficial for young children but also for creating

successful adults, according to many SEL advocates. While cognitive abilities are important for academic success, recent research has shown that non-cognitive processes are also critical to success and achievement in life. These processes include self-control, emotion regulation, self-discipline, motivation, behavioral traits, and social skills. Children who lack these skills are more likely to engage in harmful behavior, such as substance abuse, violence, and criminal activity, and are more likely to have mental health disorders and physical health issues like obesity (Belfield, 2015). Non-cognitive processes are as essential as cognitive abilities in creating successful individuals and students. Academic readiness is unachievable without a combination of social-emotional and cognitive skills.

Jones (2015) emphasizes that non-cognitive processes are malleable when addressed early in childhood to create well-rounded, successful adults. A study conducted by Jones et al. (2015) found that early childhood intervention with prosocial skills positively correlated with high school and college graduation, full-time employment as an adult, lower encounters with law enforcement, and lower risk of drug dependence. In addition, SEL is a practical investment that promotes personal growth, and self-worth, and encourages the avoidance of risky activities, as argued by Belfield (2015). For example, children who were not bullied in school may exhibit more self-confidence and have an easier time obtaining a job as an adult.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), students who participated in SEL programs generate \$11 for every \$1 invested in future earnings. SEL programs have shown benefits in the short and long term, including potential benefits for diverting at-risk youth from engaging in criminal activities that could affect them in adulthood. SEL has the potential to limit aggressiveness and classroom disruptions, creating a calm environment that encourages improved learning. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize how SEL

enhances attainment, rather than merely educational achievement (Belfield, 2015). In sum, this section provided an overview of the current research on the effects of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. From this body of scientific research, there is clear and compelling evidence that SEL programs can have positive and lasting impacts on the students' development of their social and academic development and their emotional well-being. Despite this overwhelmingly positive evidence in support of SEL programs, recent research and commentaries have begun to identify some critiques about and cautions against the implementation of SEL programs. The goal of my thesis is to better understand these perspectives and their justification, which run counter to the scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of these programs.

## METHODS

The purpose of this section is to describe *how* information was gathered and evaluated to better understand perspectives questioning the implementation of SEL programs in schools. Various sources were consulted to represent different perspectives about SEL programs, including peer-reviewed journals, published books, podcasts, webpages, and online articles. PDX Scholar and Portland State Databases, like EBSCO, and PsychINFO, were used to obtain peer-reviewed, scholarly articles. When using the Portland State Library Database, search engines geared toward Psychology and Education were used. Google Scholar was also used to search for articles. Studies by researchers Durlak and Belfield were recommended because of their extensive research on Social and Emotional Learning – their work was also studied and referenced. Because this is a literature review that examines differing attitudes, opinion articles are also referenced. Reference sections from multiple sources were also reviewed to obtain more supporting documents. Keywords like Social and Emotional Learning, Social-emotional

learning, SEL, Common Core, SEL Politics, Education, SEL Therapy, and Problems with Social and Emotional Learning, were used to find data for this literature review. Various books about education were referenced online and in physical copies.

## RESULTS

The purpose of this section is to summarize the main findings and themes that emerged from the review of perspectives that critique SEL. By highlighting the important issues and debates in the field, the goal is to provide a foundation for a better understanding of the arguments and inspiration for future research.

### 1. Social and Emotional Learning may not be for everyone.

Critics of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) argue that the programs lack conceptual clarity and specificity, leaving parents, educators, and policymakers with questions about the program's effectiveness and target audience (Dusenbury et al. (2015). While many studies examine the main effects of intervention (x) on outcomes (y), there is a need to explore the individual characteristics of children to understand how SEL can be tailored to meet their unique needs (Taylor et al. 2017; Durlak et al. 2011). For example, the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group conducted a study on the relevance of SEL in high-risk, disadvantaged schools, where students are often surrounded by peers with similar risk factors that can lead to increased classroom disruptions and aggression. The study found that implementing universal school-based prevention programs for at-risk youth led to a significant decrease in aggression among students who exhibited high levels of aggression compared to their less aggressive peers (Conduct

Problems Prevention Research Group, 2010). This highlights the potential benefits of SEL for high-risk students but raises questions about its effectiveness as a universal program.

## 2. It is not clear what SEL is and how its implemented.

Finn and Hess (2019) emphasize the importance of clearly defining what SEL is and what it is not. While there is a general consensus that SEL contributes to social and emotion development skills, they argue that some definitions of SEL are too generic and do not emphasize the importance of literacy in standard subjects. There is a need to clarify the specific skills and outcomes that SEL aims to promote and how it complements academic learning. Durlak et al., (2011) states that there is a need for a complete set of guidelines that outline the knowledge and skills students should acquire from SEL curricula. SEL also lacks clarity on how the curriculum will be implemented in efficient and viable ways. Many organizations offer different SEL frameworks that don't discuss the boundaries in which the program runs, and there is a lack of consensus among these programs (Durlak et al., 2011).

A lack of clear guidelines creates confusion and uncertainty for educators and leads to ineffective implementation strategies. Without proper training and resources, teachers are unable to efficiently teach SEL and intended outcomes are negatively affected (Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers can't bear the burden of figuring out how to incorporate SEL curricula in the classroom (Chu et al., 2022). Moreover, because of the vast program options, it is difficult to assess the efficacy of SEL within different environments (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al., (2011) and CASEL, emphasize the importance of generating specific guidelines for SEL curricula that outline specific skills students should be efficient in. Researchers agree that a common

framework should be established, and it should be evidence-based, as well as efficient and equitable across multiple contexts (Durlak et al., 2011; Finn & Hess, 2019).

### 3. SEL programs overburden teachers.

Social-Emotional learning has become a popular pedagogy among many educators, but some are concerned that introducing a new curriculum could stretch already busy teachers. As Dr. Robert Pondiscio explains in his book *How the Other Half Learns*, "...teachers spend an average of twelve hours per week gathering and generating instructional material...those are hours not spent studying students work...working with individual children on their strengths and weaknesses, [or] building relationships with parents..." Many public schools expect teachers to create their curriculum and teach it, which is challenging and time-consuming. Many teachers work an average of 54 hours per week and only half of that time is spent on instruction (Kurtz, 2022). Many feel burnt-out, underpaid, and underappreciated, according to 2022 The Merrimack College Teacher Survey. As reported by the survey, many teachers expressed wanting to spend more time on teaching and less time on administrative tasks, and other secondary duties like counseling (Kurtz, 2022). Placing additional demands stretches already overworked teachers and takes away from their primary responsibility of teaching academics (Sowell, 1993).

### 4. Teachers are not appropriately trained.

With the continued growth of Social and Emotional Learning programs, there are concerns about the appropriateness of teachers taking on the role of therapists and social workers. Pondiscio (2021) argues the need for the balance of individual privacy and autonomy when it

comes to the schools' and states' concern for their students' emotional well-being. Many schools have adopted specific ideas and techniques from popular psychology, prioritizing emotional competence over academic literacy. This approach can lead to educators unconsciously pathologizing students, especially those who are already marginalized or at risk (Ecclestone et al., 2008). Viewing children as oppressed reduces their agency and resiliency, which can create an unwarranted sense of stigma and shame (Pondiscio, 2021). Pathologizing students has the capacity for discrimination and stereotypes about certain groups of people, which creates social and cultural implications (Sowell, 1993).

Additionally, adding yet another responsibility to educators' already heavy workload may negatively impact the quality of SEL instruction and even lead to "bad therapy" outcomes (Pondiscio, 2021). Introducing new programs and curricula without proper training or support for teachers can lead to confusion, frustration, and ineffective teaching strategies (Sowell, 1993). Moreover, this approach can lead to ineffective implementation and unintended outcomes of SEL program curriculum (Durlak et al., 2011).

##### 5. SEL programs take time away from academics.

As schools increasingly focus on social-emotional learning, there is a growing concern about the neglect of standard academic subjects. Sowell (1993) argues that the focus on non-academic related outcomes, like self-esteem and social condition detracts from the purpose of education; to prepare students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in life. Most recently, a report by the 'Nations Report Card' for 2022, showed the largest decline in Math and Reading test scores

since the 1990s (NAEP, 2022). Suggesting the need to address academic deficiencies before implementing new curricular demands, like SEL.

Fordham (2017) warns that SEL implementation is time-consuming and requires significant resources, which can detract from academic instruction in common subjects like math, reading, and writing. Already struggling to teach students with limited time and resources, teachers are now faced with the potential burden of new demands, including the implementation of SEL curriculum. Sowell (1993) emphasizes the importance of mastery in academic subjects like math, reading, and writing and warns of potential consequences when diverting time and resources away from academics. Given the already struggling academic outcomes and limited time and resources for teachers, there is a risk that placing new demands on educators could decrease effectiveness in all subjects, including SEL (Pondiscio, 2021). Chu et al., (2022) suggest a balance of both curricula is necessary to avoid neglecting competencies in core academic subjects, as they both complement human development.

## 6. SEL promotes an ideology that should not be taught in schools.

Some opponents of SEL argue that these programs promote a particular set of values and beliefs that should be taught at home (Naravez et al., 2008). Critics argue that schools should focus on academic instruction rather than on moral and social engineering. Furthermore, some SEL programs incorporate meditation and mindfulness into their curriculum, which critics argue may constitute introducing religious traditions into education. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and Mind up, both integrate mindfulness into their SEL curriculum. CASEL describes the act of mindfulness as "... maintaining a moment-by-moment



awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens”. Traditionally, mindfulness and meditation were Buddhist practices used to develop awareness and transcendence (Mindworks, 2023). In Buddhist mindfulness meditation, sensing your body, feelings, mind, and perception are all key factors of this religious tradition (Mindworks, 2023). It is argued that there should be a separation of church and state, which defines a separation of religion and government entities; including SEL as a universal practice raises the question of the consequences of religious practices in education. Establishing a universal, formal SEL curriculum creates a value system determined by the education establishment and by people in power, who may share different values and beliefs.

Other critics add that SEL implementation is a cover for radical ideology. For example, Dr. James Lindsay argues in his book, *The Marxification of Education*, Marxist ideologies are being introduced into the education system through ideas of collectivism and oppression. These ideas are used in a way to indoctrinate children with Marxist beliefs and values, instead of equipping them with critical thinking skills and individuality (Lindsay, 2022). Lindsay (2022) explains how children are introduced to ‘generative themes’, carefully chosen by educators that relate to lived experiences. These themes are then used to evoke a powerful, emotional response by triggering the student, which he contends is a tactic of thought reform, akin to the role of Social Emotional Learning. Ecclestone et al., (2008) also references a similar phenomenon she describes as ‘therapeutic ethos’; a cultural script about appropriate feelings and responses to events, and a set of associated practices through which people make sense of themselves and others.

Sowell (1993) maintains that schools should remain neutral and objective, to not indoctrinate children with particular social or political agendas. They should provide children with the knowledge and tools to think critically and make positive decisions. Introducing values and

beliefs in the classroom can harbor division, as well as undermine the goal of providing students with an adequate education (Sowell, 1993).

## DISCUSSION

SEL has become an increasingly popular pedagogy with most schools in the U.S. implementing the programs into their curriculum. Even though a growing number of research has examined the benefits of SEL, there are still cautions against its universal implementation in schools. The primary implication of this literature review is to provide more insights into objections and warnings against the widescale implementation of SEL programs.

When addressing each of the findings of the results sections, it is clear that concerns with the SEL curriculum should be addressed and implementation methods researched further. For example, for the first finding, further research is suggested to determine which children most benefit from SEL programs, this method would prevent assuming a one-size-fits-all approach and promote a more targeted and successful application. Studies on SEL have noted main effects, but they often fail to explain the mechanisms that underlie these effects. To address this limitation, future research could also employ qualitative methods such as interviews and observations to uncover the underlying factors that explain why certain effects are occurring. Additionally, it is suggested that SEL program guidelines and boundaries be clearly defined for parents, educators, and policymakers. As for the concern of who is qualified to teach SEL, recommendations include extensive training and workshops for educators or having trained professionals to teach SEL curriculum in the classrooms, alongside teachers. Also, figuring out how to implement SEL without taking away from core subjects is important, especially with the

current decline in academic scores. Having SEL programs as its own class could address this concern. Moreover, to address the concerns of the possible ideological implications of SEL programs, offering voluntary, SEL-specific classes gives parents the option to choose whether they want their children to participate in the programs. Having clear and concise program guidelines available for parents and educators will also eliminate further questions and concerns about the program's curriculum.

Some limitations noted for this literature review fall mostly on time. This research was conducted over three months, more time for research could uncover more concerns, and a more detailed study using interviews to obtain additional perspectives on SEL implementations through a parent and educator lens. Also, additional time would allow for further analysis of research studies pertaining to SEL programs. For future research, it is also suggested that more data be collected qualitatively through classroom observation.

As a research assistant conducting classroom observations using EMOTERS guidelines, the positive impact of emotion-based teaching on student behavior was noticed. In classrooms where emotions are not addressed, there are more behavioral disruptions and emotional outbursts. In contrast, classrooms that value communication and teach regulation skills have fewer such issues. More specifically, it is noticed that teachers who were attentive and interacted with their students in a calm, and caring manner, had students who expressed emotion regulation skills as well as fewer, and shorter-lasting classroom outbursts. These observations suggest that emotion-based teaching may be beneficial in promoting a positive learning environment for students.

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