A Fine Balance:

Social Emotional Learning and Academic Rigour in Schools

by

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A Paper

Presented to the Gordon Albright School of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

EGC640 School Counselling Project

November, 2015

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Social Emotional Learning and Academic Rigour in Schools

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Acknowledgement Page

Thank you to my professors and supervisor at City University for sharing their passion for counselling and education: It has been truly inspiring and rewarding to combine these two important vocations. Thank you to my mentors for encouraging me to grow into the professional I want to become as well as valuing social emotional learning as much as I do. Thank you to the experts and researchers who are paving the way for much needed change in our education system. Thank you, most of all, to my supportive and ever patient partner Tyson Lehmann for tirelessly working alongside me throughout this journey.

"Let me tell you a secret: there is no such thing as an uninteresting life.

One day you must tell me your full and complete story, unabridged and unexpurgated. We will

set aside some time for it, and meet. It's very important.

Maneck smiled. 'Why is it important?'

It's extremely important because it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go

forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world."

— Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*

Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a push towards academic rigour in schools in the form of standardized testing, school ratings, and holding teachers accountable to deliver an unprecedented number of prescribed learning outcomes. The goal has been to provide students with the skills they need to thrive within the 21st century school walls and beyond. What educators, students, parents, administrators, and counsellors have found in the interim is that through the focus on academic rigour there has been a lack of emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL) in the explicit curriculum. Numerous studies have shown that social emotional learning is imperative to the well being of students. As a movement, however, exactly what SEL is, why it should be implemented, and how it should be implemented, is still a topic of discussion. Schools have struggled to implement programs successfully and also have failed to record data that supports the idea that SEL programs provide measurable outcomes for both the students and school community. In this capstone project, I sought to explore what the canon of research defines as SEL, what the various reasons are for schools to implement SEL, and what current research is warning schools to consider when implementing an SEL program.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), "hidden curriculum", emotional intelligence, citizenship, universal programs, preventive programs, mental health, character education, prosocial.

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CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

Sir Ken Robinson, a man who is passionate about the structure and aim of education explains the current paradigm of school systems is based on the pre-existing economic climate established during the industrial revolution and the philosophic thinking underpinning the Enlightenment (2010). He uses these concepts to show us that historically, and currently, schools are factory-style institutions that endeavour to sort out those who are smart and those who are not and in doing so kills creativity (3:08, 2010). Robinson points out that this system is antiquated and underserving our youth. Schools are prioritizing standardized education and testing. In doing so, Robinson claims that schools are alienating our students and convincing them that they are not smart enough to be the participating citizens that they aspire to be. As educators, we should be pondering if focusing on academia, testing, and rising above the rest is overtaking the importance of social emotional learning in preparing our youth for their tomorrow.

The purpose of this chapter is to give context to the importance of social emotional learning (SEL) in education. First, I will provide background to the evolution of education. Secondly, I will define the problem that arises when SEL is not a part of an educational plan. Next, I will highlight the importance of this issue and purpose of this study by outlining 3 evaluation questions that will be addressed later in the project. Finally, I will provide a number of terms and definitions that will help the reader understand important terminology within the discussion.

Background to the Problem

Support of Robinson's critical evaluation of current school goals is evidenced in the United States' "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) Act. The act's aim was to elevate the standards and

education opportunities for students across the country. What actually occurred, according to the National Education Association (NEA), was that

> instead of raising student achievement, NCLB has perpetuated a system that delivers unequal opportunities and uneven quality to America's children based on the zip code where they live and created a culture of high-stakes testing that makes it impossible for educators to do what is most important: instil a love of learning in their students. (National Education Association, 2015, para. 1)

As an educator myself, I have witnessed here in Canada the insidious creep of "rated" schools, online reviews of teachers, and emphasis on standardized testing to the deficit of curriculum progression. In the private school realm, there is a race for secondary students to see how many Academic Placement (AP) or rather University level courses they can accrue. An average student five years ago would have taken one AP but now students are aiming for eight courses in order to feel competitive in applying to post-secondary schools (Collingwood School, 2013). Hence the competition for high grades, no matter what the cost, is pervasive here in Canada. It is noteworthy that a recent vote in the United States has overwhelmingly resounded with a 'yes' vote to reform the NCLB act under the support of the Obama administration. The Whitehouse media web page describes the impact of NCLB as having "created incentives for states to lower their standards; emphasized punishing failure over rewarding success; focused on absolute scores, rather than recognizing growth and progress; and prescribed a pass-fail, one-size-fits-all series of interventions for schools that miss their goals" (The White House, n.d., para. 1)

Here in Canada, a national initiative called "The First National Report" was created to investigate links between concepts such as achievement, student engagement, and effective teaching. This report states that "research in the past thirty years has proven that the current

model of schooling no longer adequately meets the needs of young people or of contemporary Canadian society" (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009, p. 6). Educators, politicians, and organizations now realize that the previous unwavering focus on academic rigour has actually brought about disastrous results and so the pendulum begins to swing in the opposite direction towards social and emotional learning in the classroom as a predictor of success for our students.

Statement of the Problem

In the 1980s, the term "hidden curriculum" was coined to articulate the fact that students who exist within a school culture implicitly learn values, beliefs and norms by participating in activities and interactions, in a social climate that goes beyond the primary goal of academic study (Giroux, 1983). Wren (1999) explains that with the shifting role of a teacher away from a figure akin to "godliness" came the assumption that school culture would socialize the student. He points out that this was and is achieved through a "hidden curriculum," which became the subtext underlying the goal of academic prowess. Based on these ideas, teachers, administrators, school counsellors, and students became responsible for shaping the morals, ideals, values, and social skills of every student. Beyond the home, students would learn at school how to behave and how to interact with one another and those in authority. Hymel, Schonert-Reichl and Miller ask the very important question: "If one of the common missions of schools is to develop students into caring and contributing citizens in a democratic society, why is it that schools do not make this explicit?" (2006, p. 19). In summary, at one point in time, it was discovered that schools help students become citizens. Within that awareness teachers became cognizant of this responsibility. And so today, we are wondering if this is the case, why don't we explicitly teach the lessons that students need to learn in order to be effective, contributing members of their community.

Entering into the 21st century model of education, the identification of the learning that takes place outside of academic curriculum and test standardization is becoming more overt. I would postulate that schools inherently are both an academic and a social emotional learning (SEL) environment and students require support in this realm as much as they need support academically. Students, teachers, and the overall school community functions better when they make social and emotional learning a focus in their classrooms.

A lack of SEL competence can lead to lower academic performance, negative attitudes and behaviours, and higher emotional distress inside and outside the classroom (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). In my experience as a teacher, with the increasing exposure to bullying, especially through social media, and parents' high expectations on performance, students are required to have a strong sense of self to cope with the world's stressors. Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry's research showed that "emotions influence students' cognitive processes and performance" and "their psychological and physical health" (2002, p.92). Social emotional learning (SEL) teaches students to have a sense of self-concept or self-awareness and foster confidence in their abilities to deal with social and emotional obstacles (CASEL, 2015c). Where education and psychology intersect, there is a belief by many that students, teachers, and counsellors benefit from SEL programming in the classroom.

As often does in the realm of politics, the tides turn and the pendulum swings from a singular approach to one that is in the opposing direction. Measurable and academic based outcomes, although not left behind, are no longer the singular focus of educational reform. Social emotional learning (SEL) is being addressed as a primary concern for educators (Goleman, 1995). With this issue at the forefront, those interested in the education paradigm are bringing language and data to support this ideology:

for decades, many parents and educators have known that children's social, emotional and

ethical competencies are more predictive of life satisfaction and success than grades or

SAT scores. But it is only in the last fifteen or twenty years that researchers have

confirmed this and helped us to understand specifically which competences are most

predictive. (Cohen, 2006, p. 229).

Not only does Cohen outline how science and data point to the importance of these social

competencies, it seems our culture inherently believes this to be true as well:

when school leaders ask parents and teachers what they want their children to know and

be able to do when they graduate from high school, they usually talk about abilities that

are fundamentally social, emotional and often ethical in nature" (Cohen, 2006, p. 220).

Purpose of the Study

The report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health suggested

the importance of mental health promotion and SEL for optimal child development and school

performance by proclaiming: ''Mental health is a critical component of children's learning and

general health. Fostering social and emotional health in children as a part of healthy child

development must therefore be a national priority''(Task Force on Early Mental Health

Intervention, 2003, p.2). Researchers such as Cohen feel that SEL skills are a foundation to

teach students to participate in a democracy, improve quality of life, and profess that SEL

programs should be the right of every child (2006, p.201). This leads us to the explicit questions:

What is social emotional learning? What are the main reasons schools currently adopt social

emotional learning (SEL) programs? Moving forward, what can schools do to incorporate social

emotional learning in an authentic manner that benefits the school community?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as

> the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, 2015c, para. 1)

The Oxford Dictionaries does not have a definition for SEL but supplants it with the term "emotional intelligence," which is defined as "the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically: emotional intelligence is the key to both personal and professional success" (Oxford University Press, 2015). The popular culture encyclopedia "Wikipedia" outlines well the confusion around this term that likely reflects the knowledge of the general public, noting that social emotional learning (SEL)

> is an educational process for learning life skills but many of the aspects are contained in other educational programming such as character education, restorative justice, peer mediation, bullying prevention, anger management, drug/alcohol prevention, violence prevention, school climate, ethical-decision making, harassment prevention, positive behavior supports. (Wikipedia, 2015, para. 1)

This research project is an extensive literature review that seeks to clearly define social emotional learning (SEL), outline the benefits of social emotional learning in schools, and offer recommendations to schools adopting programs in order to benefit all school community members. I hope to inform teachers, counsellors, and administrators what SEL is and how it can improve the school environment and community in a real and practical manner.

Evaluation Questions

1. What is social emotional learning?

2. Why do schools adopt social emotional learning?

3. What can schools do to incorporate social emotional learning in an authentic manner that benefits the school community?

Importance of the Study

Research suggests that in most cases and in most populations, SEL is of benefit to students. Schools use SEL curriculum to prevent low academic achievement, drop out, problematic behaviours, and a lack of citizenship (Wilms, 2009). The implication is that when students succeed both socially and emotionally, teachers are better able to support their students in well-regulated classrooms, counsellors and administrators have less problematic behaviours to contend with, and students feel more self-sufficient (Fer, 2004). These factors lead to higher success academically and in turn shape students to be productive citizens in their school community (Greenberg, 2003).

According to many researchers (e.g. Greenberg, M.T., Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Hymel, S., Schonert-Reichl, K. & Wigelsworth M.) it is important to choose and implement SEL instruction in a thoughtful manner. For example, programs such as Roots of Empathy, MindUp, CASEL, and PATHS are some of the well-known elementary programs available today and although each program has similar themes they approach SEL in a very different manner. The research and literature supports how imperative it is that school counsellors, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and communities understand that SEL is as important as academic performance to our students. Many researchers and authors feel that it is important to back the

statement of SEL with empirical research and this often leads towards the collection of quantitative data.

Although student self-report and teacher rated scales are often the data that institutions are encouraging schools to collect, Fer (2004) makes a good case for encouraging a qualitative approach to understanding the experience of those involved in SEL programs and cites several other researchers who concur (i.e., Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Mertens, 1998; Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997). He acknowledged the importance of learning how participants feel about their education and skill acquisition in order to inform the reader i.e., "understanding the nature of reality through people's experiences via subjectively constructed processes and meanings" (2004, p. 562). Students and teachers practice these SEL skills on a daily basis, and whether intentional or not, they help to create the unique social and emotional cultural norms in their classroom (Wren, 1999). It is recommended in this work that future research continue to focus on the experience of the student and teacher. It would purport that the value of qualitative research should not be underestimated as to allow narrative to convey the importance of social and emotional learning.

Definitions of Terms

As Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is sometimes used in conjunction with or in lieu of other terms, I think it is helpful to have an understanding of the following terms:

Social Emotional Learning: "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2015c, para. 1)

Hidden Curriculum: "the pervasive moral atmosphere that characterizes schools" (Santrock, 1993, p. 452)

Citizenship: "the qualities that a person is expected to have as a responsible member of a community" (Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 2015, para. 1)

Emotional Intelligence: "Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional meanings, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote both better emotion and thought" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 5)

Universal programs:

prevention strategies are designed to reach the entire population, without regard to individual risk factors and are intended to reach a very large audience. The program is provided to everyone in the population, such as a school or community. An example would be universal preventive interventions for substance abuse, which include substance abuse education using school-based curricula for all children within a school district. (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2010)

Preventive programs:

Prevention and health promotion both focus on changing common influences on the development of children and adolescents in order to aid them in functioning well in meeting life's tasks and challenges and remaining free of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems that would impair their functioning. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on the Prevention of Mental Disorders and Substance Abuse Among Children, Youth and Adults, 2009)

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2015c)

Mental "Health: Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (World Health Organization, 2014, para. 1).

Character Education: "Character education includes and complements a broad range of educational approaches such as whole child education, service learning, social-emotional learning, and civic education. All share a commitment to helping young people become responsible, caring, and contributing citizens" (What is character education, n.d., para. 2)

Prosocial: "prosocial behaviors refer to "a broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself—behaviors such as helping, comforting, sharing and cooperation" (Batson, 1998, p. 463)

Summary

In recent decades, an objective was set here in Canada (as well as in the United States and the United Kingdom) to prepare students in primary and secondary schools for life through academic rigour (CDC, 2007). Policy structures and educational reform were put in place through standardized testing and curriculum (The White House, n.d.). The idea of students as empty vessels to be filled and then ready to perform was forwarded as the primary objective (Robinson, 2010). As students from various demographics continued to struggle with engagement in school, educators began to realize that explicitly teaching concepts of social emotional learning was gravely missing from their curriculum and school goals (Greenberg, 2003). What has become clear through the collection of data is that when SEL is delivered thoughtfully and interwoven into school culture it is of utmost importance to student success in school and beyond. What is not clear in every school is what exactly SEL is, why is it

implemented, and how best way to record its impact. This capstone project hopes to answer these questions. It also hopes to aid educators in knowing and being inspired to use SEL to balance out the goal of academic rigour. Through this approach I believe that educators will be able to support their students to develop into the people they wish to become.

In the next chapter, I will review the relevant literature regarding social emotional learning. In chapter three, I will propose a simple qualitative research methodology that would bring context to the SEL discussion in any school setting. In chapter four, I will summarize my overall conclusions about SEL in schools.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to thoroughly review literature that explains what social emotional learning (SEL) is and how it impacts education. First, I will give an overview of the topics debated in the literature. Next, I review the literature by responding to three evaluation questions: what is social emotional learning?, what are the main reasons schools adopt social emotional learning?, and what can schools do to incorporate social emotional learning in an authentic manner that benefits every school community member? In conclusion, I convey advice and guidance found in the literature that can be practically applied in an educational setting.

The debate exists on how effective SEL is, what needs to happen for the best implementation of the program, and the importance of adopting programs based on empirical evidence. It is noted that teachers are a very valuable resource to gauge students' level of skill in SEL because they know their students' behaviour well and they are also able to accurately compare it against several other children their age (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Rebecca, & Schellinger, 2011). Throughout this debate, it is important to evaluate if the social and emotional skills were ameliorated after experiencing a targeted SEL program.

Many studies suggest that SEL allows students to acquire behaviours that ameliorate the classroom climate, student mental health, and academic success (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Deutsch, 1992; Durlak, 1995; Elias, 2005; Greenberg, 2003; and Zinn, 1997). Literature shows that students' ability to thrive in a school environment is elevated when they are able to socially interact in an emotionally intelligent manner with peers and teachers. Cohen identifies that "when school leaders ask parent and teachers what they want their children to know… they usually talk about abilities that are fundamentally social, emotional and often ethical" (2006, p. 220). He also implies that this belief has become less nebulous as research has shown that SEL

skills are more predictive of happiness and success. Deutsch provides a remark from a teacher who noted that, "all of the students have the reinforcement of knowing that school is a place where we solve our difference and so actually it strengthened the norms of the school" (2014, p. 404). Some counsellors, and in collaboration with teachers, integrate SEL curriculum into classroom teaching in order to support students' abilities in dealing with counselling issues. The advantage of this approach for counsellors is that they can reach a larger number of students and therefore have more a more positive affect on the school than through one-on-one counselling sessions (Clark & Breman, 2009).

The quantitative and qualitative data collected through a current meta-analyses of over 200 studies suggests that SEL programs can elevate the skill level of students in order to be competent socially and emotionally (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programs allow students and teachers to create a platform to co-exist peacefully in order to support the goal of academic progress (Ragozzino, K., Resnik, H., Brien, M. U., & Weissberg, R. P., 2003). Durlak professes that,

> every student deserves the opportunity to have his or her potential developed. The combination of academic learning and SEL is the most promising way to accomplish this goal…toward preparing students for the tests of life, for the responsibilities of citizenship. (2011, p. 12)

As an explicit example, looking at Raimundo's (2013) study, which focuses on SEL in the middle school classroom, action research was both quantitative and qualitative with an extremely high fidelity of the school commitment to the program. The outcomes were that all participants exposed to the SEL intervention benefitted. Results showed that students improved in peer relations and social competence. Boys also showed significant improvement in self-

management and had lower levels of aggression than those who did not receive the intervention. Furthermore, a very valuable finding was that social-economic status was not a factor in the success rate—those from high and low income families benefitted equally. This is important to recognize so that schools that serve any population understand that all children regardless of class or upbringing benefit from learning how to be socially and emotionally competent.

Contrary to the previous literature, Wigelsworth, Humphrey, and Lendrum (2012) cast scepticism at the value of SEL programs. Their analysis of past literature presumes that the research was not rigorous enough, the programs tested were too controlled (therefore not realistic) and that the studies were generally from the United States; and, therefore not generalizable to all populations. Their points are well worth considering when implementing an SEL program, but much of the goal of this specific article seems to focus on contempt for the government's decision to choose a specific CASEL program for secondary schools in England. It would seem that their dismissal of the generalizability of these studies is severe and it could be indeed true that successful studies are applicable to other western world populations.

In an effort to address these issues, they conducted research that was very rigorous in its empirical design and conducted data collection and attention towards avoiding bias from those who collected data. Although much research conveys the positive aspect of SEL, these authors point to the gaps in our ability to make a full claim for the advantageous effect of SEL.

Evaluation Question 1: What is social emotional learning?

Overall, the canon of research seems to point to a benefit to social emotional learning though there is some dispute over how SEL should be taught, implemented on a large scale, and how the data should be collected to prove this assertion. However, before one is to tackle this quandary, it is important first of all to not assume that we are all speaking of the same concept.

In fact, many authors use research that falls under different categories to support the value of SEL. Therefore, our first evaluation question in reviewing this literature ought to be "What is social emotional learning?" The following text attempts to recognize terms synonymous with social emotional learning and highlight the nuances of the concepts.

Hidden Curriculum

The term "hidden curriculum" is important to the discussion of Social Emotional Learning. The acknowledgement of hidden curriculum by Jackson in 1968 brought recognition and language to the concept that schools teach students more than academia (Hymel et al., 2006). Although Jackson is often touted as the one who defined "hidden curriculum" first, Durkheim (as cited in Kentli, 2009) noted that "more is taught and learned in schools than specified in the established curriculum of textbooks and teacher manuals" (p.84). Many others who contributed to the discussion over the next several decades agreed that hidden curriculum does indeed exist, but had different opinions on its impact on the student (Apple, 2004; Dreeben, 1982; Durkeim, 1961, Giroux, 2001, Jackson, 1968; Lewy, 1991; Lynch, 1989; Margolis, 2001; Vallance, 1973, Willis, 1997 and Wren, 1993 and 1999). Giroux makes the link between SEL and hidden curriculum by defining the latter as "those unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom" (as cited in Kentli, 2009, p. 86). This definition intersects with SEL in acknowledging that schools have a role in shaping students' social behaviour and belief systems. Where current proponents of SEL depart from the theory behind "hidden curriculum," it is in the idea that this teaching is, and perhaps should remain, subvert. Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, and Miller (2006) make the case that if we know that schools are a socializing agent preparing students for society and citizenship, then schools should make the teaching of

those skills overt. Regardless, the term "hidden curriculum" illuminates a part of our understanding of social emotional learning by explaining that schools do indeed teach students not only academic curriculum but also skills as how to behave, interact and think about the people and the world around them.

Social and Emotional Intelligence

Another term that is often synonymous with and has laid part of the groundwork for social emotional learning is "emotional intelligence" or "EQ." Salovey and Mayer (1990) help us to understand and define both types of intelligences. One definition of social intelligence they summarize is the "ability to perceive one's own and others' internal states, motives, and behaviors, and to act toward them optimally on the basis of that information" (p.187). They in turn describe emotional intelligence as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p.189). Goleman (1995) worked from Salovey and Mayer's definitions to provide a definition of Emotional Intelligence that combined these two ideas. Goleman agrees with those who believed that hidden curriculum exists in social institutions; however, he felt strongly that current and future generations of children would greatly suffer if they continued to be "emotionally illiterate." He lamented that the results of this would be being prone to bullying, violence, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse (1995). Goleman explains how his concept of Emotional Intelligence has grown from just preventing dangerous behaviours to aiding in supporting academic achievement:

> In 1995, I outlined the preliminary evidence suggesting that SEL was the active
> ingredient in programs that enhance children's learning while preventing problems such
> as violence. Now the case can be made scientifically: helping children improve their self-

awareness and confidence, manage their disturbing emotions and impulses, and increase

their empathy pays off not just in improved behavior but in measurable academic

achievement. (Goleman, n.d., para. 1)

Emotional intelligence, in the view of these authors, is a necessary skill to life and academic

achievement.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is quickly becoming a term that educators and counsellors are using when

speaking of supporting social and emotional well-being of an individual environment, group

environment, and larger cultural spheres. The mindset that mindfulness cultivates was

incorporated by researchers such as Kabat-Zinn (2013), who developed a behavioural therapeutic

approach called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).   Kabat-Zinn describes MBSR as:

rigorous and systematic training in mindfulness, a form of meditation … mindfulness is

moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness. It is cultivated by purposefully paying

attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to. It is a systematic

approach to developing new kinds of agency, control, and wisdom in our lives, based on

our inner capacity for paying attention and on the awareness, insight and compassion that

naturally arise from paying attention in a specific way. (Kabbat-Zinn, 2013, p. xlix)

Organizations like The Hawn Foundation use mindfulness to enhance students' ability to learn.

They have created a program called MindUP, which asserts that it "teaches social and emotional

learning skills that link cognitive neuroscience, positive psychology and mindful awareness

training utilizing a brain centric approach" (The Hawn Foundation, 2015, para. 1). Mindfulness

is used as a way for student to learn how to self-regulate thereby being better able to focus, make

connections and succeed academically.

Prosocial skills

Prosocial skills are often noted in absentia when people are demonstrating adverse behaviour. Sugai and Horner (2006) outline such behaviours in a school environment as: "harassment, aggression, social withdrawal, and insubordination" (p.245). In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Batson explains that prosocial behaviours are "a broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself—behaviors such as helping, comforting, sharing and cooperation" (1998, p. 282). Prosocial behaviour is thought to guard against negative behaviours, which often negatively affect individuals as well as the people they interact with. Sugai and Horner (2006) propose that the implementation of prosocial behaviour programs in schools should be based on "the science of human behavior to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of school systems and organizations" (p. 246). The authors also propose that this includes "a promising approach to establishing school environments that address problem behavior in a positive and preventative manner" (p.246). Prosocial behaviour or skills is often a term used when other authors are discussing SEL programs that support students in succeeding as well as avoiding hazardous behaviours.

Social emotional learning

Finally, the term that is the central focus of this paper and used more and more often in current education dialogue is "social emotional learning" (also knows as SEL). Zins is touted as a "pioneer in the field of social emotional learning" (as cited in CASEL, 2015b, para. 1). Zins borrows Elias' definition of SEL which is "the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors" (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 1997, p. 192) The context Zins et al. places SEL into is a key definer in how he would

have us understand and explain SEL. He states that, "SEL has a critical role in improving

children's academic performance and lifelong learning" (p.208). He acknowledged that SEL had

already been proven to ameliorate children's education in other ways but that his focus was on

the relationship between SEL and school success including academic performance. Through his

book *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research*

Say? (2004), he takes a systematic approach to SEL that includes science, evidence, systems

thinking (as seen in Figure 1 below) and practical implementation guidelines.

Figure 1: *The Scientific Base of SEL programs* **(Zins, J.E., Bloodworth, M.R., Weissberg, R.P. & Walberg, H.J., 2004, p. 191)**
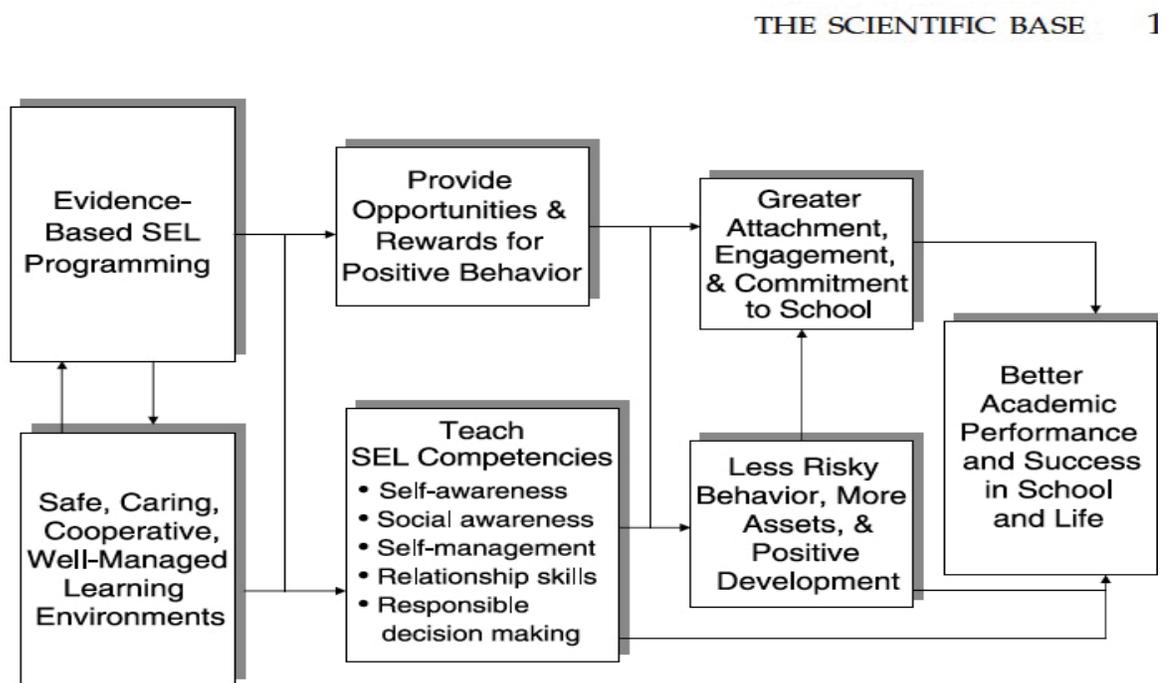
FIGURE 1.2   Evidence-based SEL programming paths to success in school and in life.

Zins was a contributor to a more recent definition of SEL that has emerged backed by

current and ongoing research and collaboration. The organization called the "Collaborative for

Academic, Social and Emotional Learning" (CASEL, 2015b), referenced as one of the eminent

leaders in their field, has carried on from Zins' work. They describe the acquisition of SEL skills

as the ability to: "acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (2012, p. 6). Schools without SEL programs may be choosing to focus only on the academic and physical development of the child. According to proponents of SEL, if a child is not socially and emotionally competent, then she or he may struggle to grow and develop academically. Those schools who believe that SEL enhances a child's school experience, as well as their potential for academic success, often base the parameters of their SEL programs around CASEL's main tenets: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Appendix A).

Conclusion

The definition of Social Emotional Learning can often be seen as synonymous with other terms such as Hidden Curriculum, Social Intelligence, Emotional Intelligence, Mindfulness, and Prosocial Behaviour. Although each term contains similarities, they carry with them a different implied use or principle. For the purposes of this paper, we will understand SEL as CASEL's definition (above) based on the organization's large evidence base and research minded approach that is specific to implementation in the school system.

Evaluation Question 2: What are the main reasons schools adopt social emotional learning?

An overwhelming number of scientific and empirical studies profess that social emotional learning (SEL) should be an important and integral part of an elementary or secondary school setting. These studies range from quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods and span from studies based on one school, to a district of schools to a meta-analyses of over 200 school-based

programs in which over 270, 000 students participated (Durlak et al., 2011) Although many of

these studies agree that SEL is vitally important to students, what differs is the reason why these

SEL programs are implemented. The response to this evaluation question aims to show the wide

array of reasons schools adopt SEL programs and to what aim they hope to support students. The

vast number of reasons that SEL is beneficial supports its implementation. However,

understanding the wide array of reasoning behind the implementation of SEL could also be seen

as a cautionary tale. It is important for a school to know what short and long term objectives are

and exactly how they might achieve that goal through the specifics of an SEL program. Cohen

explains that "theory always shapes goals, which in turn suggest methods or strategies designed

to actualize the goals" (2006, p. 205); therefore, it is important to decipher which goal is

foremost in the mind of a school before implementing an SEL program. Citizenship and school

culture, behaviour management, efficiency in the delivery of counsel, academic performance,

supporting transitions, and advocating for mental health are some of the themes that appeared in

the literature as to why schools implement SEL programs. I believe it is important to understand

why SEL programming is applied in a school to avoid haphazardly committing to the

implementation of SEL without a clear purpose or direction.

Citizenship and School Culture

The mindset that schools are places that prepare students for the world beyond is a

common reason why a school might implement an SEL program (Cohen, 2006; Greenberg,

2003; Elias, 2006; Hymel 2006). The focus then becomes on imparting skills to students that

help them become a participatory and valuable citizen and community member. Elias (2006)

conveys this philosophical approach as he professes:

our students are important … to their communities, to their future workplaces and

families, and to the world around them … every student deserves the opportunity to have

his or her potential developed. The combination of academic learning and SEL is the

most promising way to accomplish this goal. We need teachers to lead the way toward

preparing students for the tests of life, for the responsibilities of citizenship. (p. 12)

This pedagogical approach asks educators to deliver education beyond the confines of academia

and the classroom and extends the service to preparing students for the world at large. Cohen

(2006) explains that SEL provides a framework for this goal, which is based on the idea that

"research-based social, emotional, ethical, and academic educational guidelines can predictably

promote the skills, knowledge, and the dispositions that provide the foundation for the capacity

to love, work, and be an active community member" (p. 202). Hymel (2006) notes the

importance of "creating a safe, caring and inclusive community of learners that fosters universal

human qualities (compassion, fairness, respect) that underlie socially responsible citizenship"

(p.27). She highlights how there is an unwritten understanding that schools promote their role in

the education of citizenship; however, schools don't always explicitly explain how it is taught or

delivered. Hymel does commend BC for being the first province in which the Ministry of

Education "recognized that social responsibility is a standard that should be promoted to the

same degree of reading, writing, and numeracy" (p. 13). BC has just recently updated its

curriculum goals as of the year 2015 and espouses social responsibility as one of the core

competencies of education. The learning objectives akin to citizenship are described as follows:

Social responsibility involves the ability and disposition to consider the interdependence

of people with each other and the natural environment; to contribute positively to one's

family, community, society, and the environment; to resolve problems peacefully; to

empathize with others and appreciate their perspectives; and to create and maintain

healthy relationships. (The Province of British Columbia, 2015)

When a school looks beyond preparing students to be academically sound or trained for

employment, or to the broader civic duty of being a participatory and valuable community

member, citizenship may be assumed as the primary goal of an implemented SEL program.

Behaviour Management

Other schools are looking more at implementing SEL to ameliorate present and daily

interactions within the school community, which may be cause for concern. In this case, the

focus may be to manage and ameliorate the behaviour that students are expressing at school.

Cohen identifies that "when school leaders ask parent and teachers what they want their children

to know… they usually talk about abilities that are fundamentally social, emotional and often

ethical" (2006, p. 220). These programs and studies are enacted in schools that feel the need to

impress a strong moral code on the students. This may be based on having a population of

"youth at risk." These youth may have violent tendencies or be at risk for gang involvement,

drug use, risky behaviour, or dropping out of school. At the same time, based on developmental

theory, all students need coaching in terms of behaviour and self-regulation (McDevitt &

Ormrod, 2010). An example of a specific program a school might integrate would be Roots of

Empathy, a BC program that is described as "an evidence-based classroom program that has

shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children while raising

social/emotional competence and increasing empathy" (Roots of Empathy Inc., n.d., para. 1).

Students meet and form a relationship with a mom and newborn and follow along the

development of the child's life. Meanwhile students learn different social and emotional skills,

as well as are given the opportunity to understand life beyond their own ego and to the development of individuals within society.

In terms of the data that supports SEL in behaviour management, the Raimundo, R., Marques-Pinto, A. & Lima, M.L. (2013) study in a middle school showed that participants exposed to SEL programming benefitted by an improvement in self-management, lower levels of aggression, improved peer relations and improved social competence. Elias (1991) points to the long-term effects of implementing these SEL programs early on in a child's career by noting data as showing "higher levels of positive pro social behaviour and lower levels of antisocial, self-destructive, and socially disordered behavior when followed up in high school four to six years later than did the control students who had not received this program" (1991, p. 415). Osher, Sprague, Weissberg, Keenan, and Zins (2005) outline the benefits of SEL programs for a student making the transition from elementary to middle school in a comprehensive list that follows: a) understanding the consequences of behavior, (b) coping effectively with middle school stressors, (c) more prosocial behavior, (d) fewer or reduced absences, (e) more classroom participation, (f) greater effort to achieve, (g) reductions in aggression and disruptions, (h) lower rate of conduct problems, (i) fewer hostile negotiations at school, (j) fewer suspensions, (k) better transition to middle school, and (l) increased engagement. (p. 8)
This is not to say that secondary schools do not benefit, as researcher Deutsch (1992) provides excerpts from interviews of teachers and students at a secondary school with a strong emphasis on a collaborative behaviour code of conduct for staff and students. A staff member noted that, "all of the students have the reinforcement of knowing that school is a place where we solve our difference and so actually it strengthened the norms of the school" (Deutsch, 1992, p. 2). Deutsch describes a school community that places an overt importance on students learning

social and emotional skills which produces students who know how to regulate their own emotions and interact towards others (1992). The reasoning follows that schools implement SEL to help students to remain members of the school community; thereby avoiding engagement in risky behaviour that could threaten a student's commitment to her or his education and becoming a healthy functioning member of society.

Efficiency in the Delivery Of Counsel to Students

Guidance has been an important role in Canadian schools as students plot out their academic and life path. Recently, parents are more and more concerned about how their child is coping with every day life, and social emotional counselling has become a more integral role of the guidance counsellor's mandate in schools (Osher, 2005). The School Counsellors chapter of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association explains that,

> as school counsellors, we believe that opportunities for attaining emotional health and mental well-being are at the heart of learning. The school counselling profession supports the personal, social, academic, and career development of students in order to provide children and youth with the opportunity to achieve their true potential. (2015, para. 1)

A recent study by Clark and Breman (2009) goes a step further in that it proposes how counsellors can more effectively provide students with this type of SEL through integration into the classroom. They support the idea that school counsellors be used to impart SEL skills in the classroom and to collaborate with teachers in order to support an individual or small group intervention. Clark and Breman also point out some of the constructs of SEL but more importantly describe the real value of reaching many students on a group or school-wide level such as school success skills, organization, cooperating with others in groups, completion of work, classroom conduct, respect for self and others, dealing with peer pressure, and good

citizenship. The authors point to the fact that legally schools and counsellors are obliged to meet the directives of national governing bodies that oblige educators to "encompass these important themes to school success, in an attempt to 'reach all students' as required by NCLB (2002), the ASCA (2004a) ethical standards, the ASCA (2205a) National Model, and counselors' own sense of purpose" (2009, p. 10). What is very interesting to me in this statement is that it acknowledges a counsellor's own sense of purpose. Most provinces in Canada require a school counsellor to have either a certificate or a Master's degree in counselling (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2012). This training goes far and beyond course selection and post-secondary planning. The social and emotional well-being of students rests on the shoulders of counsellors to support and ameliorate. Clark and Breman (2009) believe that having a counsellor come into the classroom to collaborate on SEL lessons and programming would be highly beneficial in that students would more easily be able to transfer and practice the skills that they learned in the classroom environment, teachers would be able to reinforce these skills, students would avoid missing curriculum to be pulled out for one-on-one sessions, and counsellors would become more of an integrated resource in the school. They make an astute argument that fits with the issue of overcrowded classrooms in modern day education. SEL programs could be a more effective way of reaching students than one on one consults, SEL matches the mandate and personal training of a school counsellor, and serves the greater purpose of a counselling role.

Mental Health

Mental health challenges as a topic, and as an experience for those in our society, is often stigmatized; yet, students suffer from issues in mental health in our schools. The Mental Health Commission of Canada produced a recent document called "Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada" (2013). Subsequently, the Mental Health

Commission of Canada's Youth Council (YC) worked over the last two years to take that

document and translate it into language that could reach youth. The overall goal of both

documents is to organize positive and systemic change to address mental health in Canada.

Specific to youth, it was reported that

> up to seventy percent of mental health problems and illnesses begin in childhood or
>
> adolescence and as many as three in four children and youth with mental health problems
>
> and illnesses do not access services and treatments. Children who experience mental
>
> issues are at much higher risk of experiencing them as adults and are also more likely to
>
> have other complicating health and social problems" (Task Force on Early Mental Health
>
> Intervention, 2003, p. 30).

To address this concern, the same commission aligns with the importance of SEL programs in

schools and states:

> we should have programs that take a very broad approach to mental health and more
>
> targeted programs that specifically address children and youth who have a high risk of
>
> mental health issues —due to poverty, family violence, or a parent having a mental health
>
> or substance use problem. (p. 24)
>
> Even more specifically, they call for service providers, including educators, to provide
>
> for youth "a key focus [which] should be on becoming resilient and attaining the best
>
> mental health possible as they grow" (p.16). SEL programs that focus on resiliency,
>
> wellness, and coping strategies can ease a student's struggle with mental health issues
>
> (Task Force on Early Mental Health Intervention, 2003).
>
> An example of a targeted SEL program interwoven with mental health is the Friends

program, which was developed in Australia, and asserts its program initiatives to be based on

over 25 years of research. It is described as "building resilience and preventing/treating anxiety and depression in individuals and families of all ages… the programs employ a positive psychology approach, focused on building strengths and promoting a healthy lifestyle (rather than on deficits and problems)" and "can drastically reduce bullying, improve attention and learning as well as the ability of students and teachers to cope with stress" (The FRIENDS Programs International Foundation Pty Ltd, 2013, para. 2). Elementary schools in BC use the Friends program.

Another targeted SEL and mental health program is Taming Dragons, which was developed at the BC Children's Hospital by Dr. Garland and Dr. Clark in the 1980s. This program allows classroom teachers and counsellors to help students build resilience in order to face fears, anxiety, and deal with difficult life situations. The premise is based on a cognitive behavioural approach, which is a well-evidenced theoretical platform (Gregorowski & Garland, 2009). There are counsellors who use this program in BC schools.

If schools and counsellors want to use SEL to build resilience and specifically tackle mental health and wellness, there are targeted and evidence-based programs available. Programs that address common issues of mental health such as anxiety or depression can help deliver effective support to students at an age where they can really benefit.

Academic Performance

One might argue that the strongest reason (or at least the most relatable for educators and parents alike) to implement SEL in schools is to improve student academic success. Deutsch (1992) asserts that SEL programs aid students in skills such as locus of control, social well-being, positive mental states, self-esteem, problem solving, conflict resolution, and academic achievement. The strongest directive to linking academic success and SEL programming is

Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analyses, which included 213 school-based universal social and emotional learning programs. It engaged 270,034 students ranging from kindergarten to high school students. Most students who experienced an SEL program scored 11 percentage points higher than would a student who did not go through the program. This meta-analyses is key in its message that SEL does not only apply to youth at risk, or to those who struggle with mental health or students needing prosocial skills. The research clearly indicates that social emotional learning applies to every member of the student body because it correlates to academic success, which is the main goal that most schools espouse. Pekrun links SEL and academics by explaining that based on research "emotions influence students' cognitive processes and performance, as well as their psychological and physical health" (2002, p. 2). Elias asserts that "when schools implement high-quality SEL programs and approaches effectively, academic achievement of children increases" (2006, p. 5). Elias conveys his idea on the importance of both academic and SEL skills and how they interrelate:

> SEL is sometimes called "the missing piece," because it represents a part of education that links academic knowledge with a specific set of skills important to success in schools, families, communities, workplaces, and life in general ... there is a danger to each of us … when children grow up with knowledge but without social-emotional skills and a strong moral compass. Hence, a combination of academic learning and SEL is the true standard for effective education for the world as we now face it. (2006, p. 6)

The fine balance of a quest for academia and the importance of SEL is displayed well in his thought process.

Willms et al. (2009) recently collaborated on the Canadian Education Association first national report called "Transforming Classrooms Through Social, Academic and Intellectual

Engagement" in which they looked at students' experience in school specific to engagement. The authors propose a transformation of the current education system that embodies the importance of "a clear and consistent focus on classroom and school practices that positively affect all dimensions—social, academic and intellectual—is key to ensuring that far more students become effective learners" (2009, p. 41). Mizelle (1999) follows this line of thinking by outlining the importance of including specific programs that teach students social skills to handle transitioning middle school to high school and how that can have a positive impact on their academic success.

The pendulum seems to be swinging back towards the inclusion of SEL in schools as supported by education bodies, yet at the same time it does not leave behind the importance of academics. There is a fine balance between promoting social and emotional learning and supporting students in their academic journey. With finesse, educators, counsellors, and administrators can implement targeted and well-researched programs in order to ameliorate both social and emotional skills as well as academic success.

Conclusion

Schools use SEL curriculum in order to contend with various student issues. Some students exhibit lower academic achievement, display problematic behaviours, struggle with transitions or exemplify a lack of citizenship. Other schools simply feel it is the best model for supporting academic progress. The implication of SEL is that when students succeed both socially and emotionally, teachers are better able to support their students in well-regulated classrooms, counsellors have less problematic behaviours to contend with and students feel more self-sufficient which leads to higher success academically and in being a productive citizen in their school community. Many studies suggest that SEL allows students to acquire behaviours

that ameliorate the classroom climate, student mental health, and academic success (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Deutsch, 1992; Durlak, 1995; Elias, 2005; Greenberg, 2003; and Zinn, 1997). The organization called "Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning" (CASEL), referenced as one of the eminent leaders in their field, describes the acquisition of SEL as the ability to: "acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (2012). Often schools base the parameters of their SEL programs around CASEL's main tenets: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Appendix A). Other schools without SEL programs may be choosing to focus solely on the academic and physical development of the child, which could hinder success in all areas of a child's growth. Regardless of the focus on academics, if a child is not socially and emotionally competent, they can struggle to grow and develop academically as well. It is a fine balance of tending to the social, emotional, and academic success of our students.

Evaluation Question #3: What can schools do to incorporate social emotional learning in an authentic manner that benefits every school community member?

The preceding response to the second evaluative question presented much evidence to support the importance of including SEL programs and curriculum in our schools. However, a common theme existent in the discussion of almost every study cited points to an issue of intentional administration of SEL. Greenberg (2003) comments that the current impact of SEL programs is "limited because of insufficient coordination with other components of school operations and inattention to implementation and evaluation factors necessary for strong program impact and sustainability" (2003, p. 466). He is possibly responding to critics that it is not SEL

itself that is ineffective but that the people who implement SEL may affect the outcomes.   He

further comments that quality results depend on

> development of research-based, comprehensive school reform models that improve
>
> social, health, and academic outcomes; educational policies that demand accountability
>
> for fostering children's full development; professional development that prepares and
>
> supports educators to implement programs effectively; and systematic monitoring and
>
> evaluation to guide school improvement. (p. 466)

Countless authors agree that programs need to be adopted with clear intention and thoughtfulness

behind the structure of the implementation. Furthermore, most authors implore educators to

track the efficacy and results of SEL instruction (otherwise, how does one assess that the

specific SEL curriculum is having a positive impact on our students)? This debate asks us to

ponder the importance of the following three concepts: (1) adopting evidenced based programs,

(2) intentionally gearing SEL towards a specific school and its needs, and (3) collecting data to

find out if the program and its implementation is affecting positive change.

Importance of Evidence Based Programs

Once a school, teacher, or district decides to implement SEL, it is advised that an

evidenced based program is chosen. Upon completion of a meta-analyses, Durlak et al. state

that, "it is critical to ensure that these efforts are informed by theory and research about best SEL

practice" (2011, p. 420). Zins (1997) cautions that although many schools have good intentions

in implementing an SEL program, they do so without the effort to select a well-researched

program that is tailored to their needs. Moreover, researchers point out time and again that

teachers or schools need to choose evidenced based programs and put intention into their SEL

programs in order to get the results they are hoping for. Cohen (2006) encourages research-

based programs be sought and used in schools through research partnerships and professional

development. The over-arching message from Cohen is that people with the ability to enact

policy should stop separating education into SEL and student mental health, but come to the

realization that they are inherent to each other.

An example of a resource in selecting evidence-based programming exists in the most

recent CASEL guide (2015a). The organization has compiled a list of 'SELect' programs, which

meet criteria based on a variety of factors such as systemic implementation, data supporting its

efficacy through randomized control trials, and a component of staff training. The data for

programs chosen showed "improvements in social and emotional competence, reductions in

problem behaviour, and improved academic performance" (p. 35). An list of evidenced based

programs to choose from is shown below in the table "2015 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and

Emotional Learning Programs—Middle and High School Edition" (CASEL, 2015a, p. 37).

Table 1 2015 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs

Program Name & Citation	Study Design	Grades Evaluated	Geographic Location	Race/ Ethnicity	Study Sample Size	% Reduced Lunch	Improved Academic Performance	Improved Positive Soc. Behavior	Reduced Problem Behaviors	Reduced Emotional Distress	Improved SEL Skills & Attitudes	Improved Teaching Practices	Follow-Up Effects
Expeditionary Learning													
Nichols-Barrer & Haimson (2013)	QE	6th-8th	Urban	Black, Hispanic	3016	71%	√						None
Facing History and Ourselves													
Domitrovich, C.E., Syvertsen, A., Cleveland, M., Moore, J.E., Jacobson, L., Harris, A., Glenn, J., & Greenberg, M.T. (2014)	RCT	7th, 8th	Urban Pennsyl-vania	Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial	496	Not Reported		√	√		√		None
Lions Quest, Skills for Adolescence													
Eisen, M., Zellman, G. L., & Murray, D. M. (2003)	RCT	7th	Urban, Suburban	Black, Hispanic	5610	Not Reported			√		√		Reduced Problem Behaviors, Improved SEL Skills & Attitudes (91 Weeks)
Malmin, G. (2007)	QE	6th, 7th	Urban, Rural	Not reported	716	Not Reported					√		None
Responding In Peaceful and Positive Ways													
Farrell, A. D., Meyer, A. L., & White, K. S. (2001)	RCT	6th	Richmond, Virginia	Black	474	Not Reported			√				None
Farrell, A. D., Valois, R. F., & Meyer, A. L. (2002)	QE	6th	Rural Florida	Hispanic, White	161	Not Reported			√				None
Farrell, A. D., Valois, R. F., Meyer, A. L., & Tidwell, R. P. (2003)	QE	6th, 7th	Rural Florida	Black, Hispanic, White	1340	65.4%			√		√		Reduced Emotional Distress (4 months)
Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention for Middle School													
Espelage, D. L., Low, S., Polanin, J. R., & Brown, E. C. (2013)	RCT	6th	Illinois, Kansas	Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial, White	3616	74.1%			√				None
Student Success Skills													
Lemberger, M. E., Selig, J. P., Bowers, H., & Rogers, J. E. (2015)	RCT	7th	Rural	Hispanic, White	193	81%	√				√		None

The table breaks down factors for consideration, data collected and an analysis on sample SEL

programs, which can help educators choose a program that is supported by research. Ethically, it

behoves educators and administrators to implement programs that have evidence providing past

history of success. The information noted in the table conveys important factors about the

generalizability of the SEL program results; for example, race and location might help one in

choosing an appropriate program. Sample size can indicate reliability of the data. Finally, the

categories of results help to narrow down what the goal of the SEL program is (e.g. improved

academic performance, reduced behaviour problems, improved SEL skills and behaviours,

improved teaching practices and follow-up effects).

Importance of creating or selecting programs unique to the school or classroom

Implementation of SEL should be done in a way that meets the individual school or

classroom needs. Weare (2007) describes the aim and early success of the SEAL pilot program

in the UK mixed with the complexity of applying this program in a secondary school:

> Schools appreciate the approach taken by the pilot activity, which attempts to be
>
> collaborative and evolutionary rather than top down and rushed, qualities, which they
>
> find refreshing, although there has been some frustration in schools, which like to be
>
> given a recipe, and told what to do. (2007, p. 112)

Weare (2007) wisely points out the tension an educator might feel between the restrictive nature

of being told to adopt a prescribed program versus the weight of responsibility in having to

implement SEL into their classroom without prearranged tools. Several authors point to the idea

that schools should have a deeper philosophical underpinning to the implementation of SEL. For

example, Wilson et al. (as cited in Greenberg, 2003) contend that "future research should go

beyond examining "Which program works?" to more sophisticated, ecologically based questions

such as, "Which combinations or sequences of strategies work best?" and "How can schools effectively design comprehensive packages of prevention strategies and implement them in a high-quality fashion?" (p. 269). Greenberg also recommends "coordinated multiyear programming" and encourages an "explicit framework for school-based prevention that broadly encourages efforts to promote students' health, character, and citizenship with intentional programming to improve academic performance and other school functioning" (2003, p. 470). Ideally, planned, ongoing, systematic, and coordinated SEL instruction should begin in preschool and continue through high school. But what Greenberg is alluding to is that implementing SEL ought to be a more thoughtful endeavour than simply picking a well-researched program. He is asking educators to implement SEL with thoughtfully chosen strategies, incorporating several years of programming and is based on a solid framework that links to a variety of learning outcomes. This is best accomplished through effective class-room instruction, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and broad student, parent, and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). Elias (2006, p.7) provides the tool below, which is helpful for implementation of an SEL program: (a) Link social-emotional instruction to other school services; (b) Use goal setting to focus instruction; (c) Use differentiated instructional procedures; (d) Promote community service to build empathy; (e) Involve parents; (f) Build social-emotional skills gradually and systematically; (g) Prepare and support staff well; (h) Evaluate what you do. Educators could use this simple eight step guide to make sure that implementation of SEL is being done in a comprehensive manner. CASEL (2015a) also provides three principles to help educators in the implementation process:

Principle 1: School and district teams—rather than an individual—should engage diverse stakeholders in the program adoption process to identify shared priorities.

Principle 2: Implementing evidence-based SEL programs within systemic, ongoing district and school planning, programming, and evaluation leads to better practice and more positive outcomes for students.

Principle 3: It is critical to consider local contextual factors (e.g., student characteristics, programs already in place) when using the *CASEL Guide* and gathering additional information in order to make the most effective decisions about which programs to implement.

CASEL's guiding principles allow one to see the importance of context, collaboration and evaluation as essential to the success of implementing an SEL program.

Creating a framework, acknowledging the complexity of implementation, engaging various stakeholders, and operating within a principled approach will help garner the success of SEL programs. How well the SEL program is implemented has a direct impact on the success of the students therefore it is an important and integral component of this educational approach (Greenberg, 2003).

Accountability

Elias (2006) is clear on the importance of accountability once an SEL program has been implemented:

although educators cannot guarantee the outcomes of all their efforts, they do have an ethical responsibility to monitor what they do and to attempt to continuously improve it. Therefore, educators need ways to keep track of student learning and performance in all areas, including the development of social-emotional abilities. SEL efforts should be

monitored regularly, using multiple indicators to ensure programs are carried out as

planned. (Elias, 2006, p.12).

Many authors (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Durlak, 2011; Elias,1991; Greenberg, 2003; Hymel, 2006,

Osher, 2005; Zins, 2013) ask the research community to collect data in order to prove the

worthiness of SEL. Practitioners can use to the following four questions to self-reflect on their

SEL implementation (Sugai & Horner, 2006, p.248):

1. Is the practice effective? What is the likelihood that the desired effects or outcomes

will be achieved with the practice?

2. Is the practice efficient? What are the costs and benefits of adopting and sustaining the

practice?

3. Is the practice relevant? Does a contextual fit exist among the practice, the individuals

who will use the practice, and the setting or culture in which the practice will be used?

4. Is the practice durable? What supports are needed to ensure accurate and sustained use

of a practice over time?

Sugai and Horner (2006) point out that it is not enough for an educator to simply adopt an SEL

program; nor, is it enough to have a well thought out implementation process. Ultimately, one

needs to ascertain if the teachers have found the program efficient, whether students have found

it to be relevant, or whether or not administration is noting an enduring understanding that has

been created and nurtured.

Conclusion

Hymel (2006) encapsulates the overall concerns explored in this third evaluative question

with the following declaration:

> Schools are an ideal context for the implementation of effective prevention and
> intervention efforts, but these must be based on strong conceptual models and sound
> research and must be subject to ongoing evaluation. Supporting the social-emotional
> development of children and youth not only provides a foundation for academic growth,
> but also for creating a safe, caring and inclusive community of learners that fosters
> universal human qualities (compassion, fairness, respect) that underlie socially
> responsible citizenship. (p. 27)

Researchers and educational experts alike have told us with emphasis that choosing evidence-based programs is important. They have also noted that it is essential to apply SEL through a systemic framework. Finally, the research is unanimous in declaring the need for more evidence to qualify the change and value of SEL programs. The following chapter is an example of a research study proposal that one could implement in a school in order to generate data and evaluate SEL programming beyond the general reflection asked of a teacher.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH STUDY PROPOSAL

Fer (2004) makes a good case for encouraging a qualitative approach to understanding the experience of those involved in social emotional learning (SEL) programs and cites several other researchers who concur (i.e., Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Mertens, 1998; Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Fer stressed the importance of "understanding the nature of reality through people's experiences via subjectively constructed processes and meanings" (2004, p. 562). Students and teachers practice these SEL skills on a daily basis as they help to create the unique social and emotional cultural norms in their classroom. Finding out the teachers' perspective on what students individually and as a group gain from social emotional learning, as well as how the teachers felt about delivering the curriculum, is indeed important. Overall, the research points to the value of including social emotional learning in the classroom and school context especially when data supports its implementation.

Kendziora, Weissberg, Ji, and Dusenbury (2011) note that teachers are a very valuable resource to gauge students' level of skill in SEL because they know their students' behaviour well and they are also able to compare it against several other children their age. Throughout this debate, it is important to evaluate if social and emotional skills are ameliorated after experiencing a targeted SEL program.

Below is a research proposal that focuses data collection on a qualitative approach. It is a simple and straightforward way to get feedback from teachers on how they think SEL is affecting their classroom and school environment. This is one tool that is available. Schools could easily implement a mixed mode research style in which they administer surveys to staff and students to calculate and make assertions based on quantitative data. The research proposal

that follows would require a staff member or student intern who is versed in the collection of and communication of qualitative data.

Description of Research Methodology

The specific aims of this research project are to collect data through a focus group of teacher participants after delivering an SEL program implemented in a school classroom. Qualitative research analysis can expose how student learning and skill acquisition around SEL affects the classroom and school environment when engaged in a culture that promotes CASEL'S ideals. The project seeks to understand the teachers' perception of their students' social and emotional behaviour in relation to the curriculum taught. The research also aims to explore how the teachers think that the SEL programming affected their classroom and school environment.

Research Design

This project will use a qualitative design with data collection from a focus group as the central theme. Students will experience the integration of a minimum of three Social Emotional learning lessons integrated into the classroom by their teachers. The framework for these lessons will be structured using "The 2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs—Preschool and Elementary School Edition" or the "2015 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs—Middle and High School Edition." A member of the school staff team, such as the counsellor or counsellor intern or an outside researcher, will undertake a qualitative research methods approach. The procedure will be to pose a number of questions to a small group of 6-10 teachers and faculty using the format of a focus study group.

Selection of Participants

Six to 10 willing and voluntary teachers in the school will be invited to participate in a focus group (See Appendix B for sample of invitation). All ethnicities, gender, sexes, and cultural backgrounds will be included in the study. It is proposed to begin this process after school has been in progress for a minimum of a month in order to give teachers time to adjust to a new year of teaching. Teachers will start introducing SEL lessons into the classroom using CASEL's core competencies as a way to thematically plan lessons. In the proposed research site, the administration would be committed to choosing CASEL as an overall structure but would give teachers the license to adapt a well-thought out lesson and progression that fits the needs of the population and which links well to the other academic curriculum.

Analysis or response to focus group dialogue will be highlighting the main themes (detailed further under *Data Collection*) that arise. The researcher will record and discuss how these might be addressed in a school that is trying to implement an SEL program.

Ethical considerations

Written consent will be obtained from adults. No incentives should be provided in order to get teachers to participate. The person who takes on the role of the researcher should not be an administrator or someone who has an authority role over the teaching staff. Other ethical considerations are that the data won't be totally anonymous because other group members will hear each other speak; however, the researcher should address the need to respect and keep other people's words and opinions private. All participants as well as the school and community itself will remain anonymous within the report since it could be easy for readers to make conjectures. Staff will be provided an email of introduction to the research project that includes contact

information for the researcher, the onsite counsellor, and any other applicable resources in case they experience a need to discuss the study's impact.

In terms of bias, the researcher will have to be careful to make sure that any emotional attachment to the outcome of the study does not impede the reflective practice in the publication of the results.

Data Collection and Recording

Teachers will start introducing SEL lessons into the classroom using CASEL's core competencies as a way to thematically plan lessons. Analysis or response to focus group dialogue will be highlighting the main themes, issues, problems, questions, flow, shifts, or what was not addressed in the conversation of the focus group. The structured focus group questions could be as follows:

1. How and when have you used social emotional learning in your classroom over the past school year?

2. Tell me about positive experiences you've personally had teaching social emotional learning?

3. Tell me about challenges or frustrations you've personally had teaching social emotional learning?

4. Let's list in point form what your students have benefitted most from learning about social emotional learning whether inside the classroom or in the general school environment?

5. Could you list for me in point form any negative outcomes from social emotional learning in the classroom or in the general school environment?

6. How would you describe the efficacy of using CASEL as a platform for creating social

emotional curriculum in the classroom?

7. How would you describe the role of educators such as teacher, admin, counsellor,

parent and student in the learning of social emotional learning?

8. Of all the things we've talked about today what is most important to you?

9. If you were an administrator or a counsellor supporting teachers in implementing

social emotional learning what would by the key factors you would attend to?

10. Is this an adequate summary and have we missed anything?

Identifiers will be removed from the dataset. Participants will be coded but can readily

be found by the researcher through a confidential master list. Assigned letters to protect

anonymity will denote teachers. The master list of coding and names of participants will be kept

separately from the transcription. The data will be encrypted and stored in locked files in a

password-protected computer in a locked office with access limited to the researcher and

supervisor for 5 years. Paper storage will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office

with access limited to the researcher and supervisor for five years. Audio files will be stored in

locked files in a password-protected computer in a locked office with access limited to the

researcher and supervisor for five years. After this time, all paper data and communication will

be shredded and any digital and audio files will be erased.

The researcher will review the recording and then comment on majority or minority

views, quotations that convey a typical response, point out where the teachers unanimously

agreed and where they did not, and convey any insight teachers highlighted specific to the impact

SEL programs had on their classroom experience. The article "Reporting interview and focus

group findings" could be a valuable resource (Prairie Research Associates, n.d.).

Possible Limitations

This research plan proposes to use a qualitative approach through a focus group of teachers in a school. This poses issues with generalizability as the sample size will be small and the student socio-economic class may not be as varied as other school classrooms. However, the findings will still be useful as a starting point. The quality of the data will depend on the commitment to the process displayed by the teachers and the ability for the researcher to ask the right questions.

Summary

By collecting data after students interact with SEL programming, researchers and educators may be able to pinpoint more specifically what the value is and where the commitment would be to SEL programming. Making sure that those who deliver the education, and work with the students on a daily basis, have a voice is a powerful perspective to show those who make decisions around education.

After reviewing the literature, the working hypothesis is that for the most part researchers either agree that SEL skills are important or that they cannot discount that they aren't important. A lot of time is spent debating how to clearly articulate the empirical data behind this assertion. The discourse should include the cultural perspective of the impact of SEL programming on the student, teacher, and counsellor experience within the classroom. Overall, the sense is that students benefit from SEL programs in schools but researchers need to make sure they are collecting data and doing it in a way that the results are generalizable.

CHAPTER 4   OVERALL CONCLUSION

In recent decades, students in elementary and secondary schools have been placed in a

system that considers academia of utmost importance. Schools, administrators, and policy

makers decided that standardized testing, striving for high grades, data and ranking performance

are what should shape the goals and dreams of our youth … but at what cost? Several studies on

social emotional learning (SEL) show the vast array of assets that SEL instruction provides for

students. The benefits include an impressive list of life skills such as: self-regulation, prosocial

behaviour, the ability to problem-solve, conflict resolution skills, emotional resiliency, mental

health, ethical competencies, emotional intelligence, moral character, and an understanding of

citizenship. Despite these advantages, the education system has not made SEL an overt focus up

until recently. Researchers are now pointing out that in fact these types of SEL competencies

also directly correlate to academic success. As schools ponder this link and move to implement

SEL programs, it is important that practitioners do so thoughtfully. It is a fine balance to deliver

academia and social emotional learning in order to complement each other. Evidence-based

programs that fit the context of the student and are implemented systemically and over a longer

period of time will more likely be successful. Various tools, guiding principles and checklists

are available to help educators implement these programs with intention. The research is

positive in its regard of SEL programs; however, there is a need for those who administer the

programs to gather evidence by evaluating and tracking the results of the programs as an ethical

practice. Quantitative data has been helpful to articulate the benefits of SEL programs but

qualitative investigations could add context and a rich dialogue to the student and teacher

experience. If one were asked, "Why would this be important?", one could respond that we need

to have the skills to know and express who we are so that we can move forward in the world and

find success.

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Appendix A

Adapted from "The Five Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies" (CASEL, 2012, p. 9)

CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective and behavioral competencies. The definitions of the five competency clusters for students are:

- **Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

- **Self-management:** The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

- **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

- **Responsible decision making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

Appendix B

Verbal Script for announcement to staff offering to participate in a Focus Group:

I am facilitating a 45-minute focus group after school and inviting teachers who would like to

volunteer to come and share their perspective on the impact of social emotional learning in the

classroom and school environment. This study is being done in partial requirements of an

advanced degree (a Masters of _____at _____

_____University). I hope to have a small group of 8-10 teachers. Please let me know in person

or via email sent to _____ if you would be interested in joining the

group.

Email Script once a participant has expressed interest in joining the Focus Group:

Dear colleague,

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this focus group. The group will discuss a variety

of perspectives on the impact of social emotional learning in the classroom and school

environment. Please come ready to share your opinions with myself, and your teaching peers for

45 minutes. This study is being done in partial requirements of an advanced degree (a Masters of

_____ at _____University). All people and information will

remain confidential within the research paper. I am happy to show you my research paper once

it is complete. Please note that participation is voluntary, information is confidential and you as

the participant has the right to withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. Please

feel free to contact me at the email _____, or in person, at any time if you have

any questions or concerns. I look forward to meeting with you and thank-you wholeheartedly for

your participation.