The Moral and Religious Roots of Social and Emotional Learning

By Jay P. Greene

June 2019

Key Points

- Social and emotional learning (SEL) might be a new term, but at its core it represents the educational priorities of character education.
- For many Americans, SEL's roots are deeply enmeshed in moral and religious precepts, and those promoting these as secular skills would do well to recognize and respect that fact.
- Specifically, proponents should resist the temptation to centrally manage SEL. Instead, they should embrace the opportunity for local and voluntary communities to align SEL instruction with their moral preferences.

A growing number of advocacy groups, educators, and families are concerned that something important is missing from modern public education. They recognize the necessity of students making progress in their math and reading abilities, but they fear that a narrow focus on those subjects has caused schools to neglect other essential aspects of education. In particular, they believe schools can and should play a central role in helping students develop their attitudes and relationships with others and shape their behavior accordingly. This set of skills, beliefs, and behaviors is known as social and emotional learning (SEL). It includes things such as impulse control, self-efficacy, empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving.

The backers of SEL are entirely right that schools need to attend to these broader educational goals, just as they do to specific academic content. As the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development puts it:

> Children require a broad array of skills, attitudes, and values to succeed in school, careers, and in life. They require skills such as paying attention, setting goals, collaboration, and planning for the future. They require attitudes such as internal motivation, perseverance, and a sense of purpose. They require values such as responsibility, honesty, and integrity. They require the abilities to think critically, consider different views, and problem solve.[1]

I'm generally sympathetic to those advocating for SEL and hope they succeed in their efforts. My concern is that they are likely to fall far short if they fail to acknowledge the moral and religious roots of SEL, do not consider its history and how past efforts have managed to succeed, and attempt to reinvent those past efforts from scratch on a technocratic foundation that is at odds with what allows SEL to be effective.

Let us consider each challenge in turn. "Social and emotional learning" may be a new term, but it represents a set of educational priorities that are as old as education itself. In the past, this has been called character education. Advocates suggest SEL is more than just character education. But it seems to me that the basis of SEL is what we've long considered character education.

Indeed, it would appear that advocates, perhaps disliking the moral judgment that the word "character" connotes, wish to downplay SEL's moral and religious roots and prefer instead to rebrand the concept on a modern and scientific basis. This is a mistake. SEL's long history has much to teach us about how these efforts succeed. And embracing the moral and religious roots helps the movement avoid reinventing old concepts by stripping them of what many people find appealing and motivational.

Moral and religious ideas are inherent in SEL, which is why they have always been connected.

Not only is there nothing new about the idea that education ought to emphasize matters of character, but even the way in which these educational goals are classified can be traced back to antiquity. The cardinal virtues, first described by Socrates in *The Republic* and later incorporated into Christian theology, consist of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice.[2] There is nearly a one-to-one correspondence between the cardinal virtues and the core SEL competencies as identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).[3] Prudence corresponds to what CASEL calls "responsible decision-making," which includes identifying and solving problems, reflecting, and ethical responsibility. Courage corresponds to what CASEL calls "self-awareness," which includes self-confidence and self-efficacy. Temperance corresponds to the SEL core competency "self-management," which includes impulse control and self-discipline. And justice corresponds to "social awareness" and "relationship skills," which include empathy, respect for others, and teamwork.

The strong similarity between CASEL's classification of SEL and the cardinal virtues of Greek and Christian thought is no accident. CASEL has classified SEL in this way because it reflects how we tend to think about these issues, even if the organization is not consciously aware of the similarity. But by effectively renaming the cardinal virtues and detaching them from their origins in moral and religious philosophy, CASEL may be hoping to shed whatever controversies and other baggage come with this historical approach so that it can start fresh with a clean slate.

The Problem with Morally Detached SEL

But a fresh start for SEL stripped of its moral and religious roots is neither possible nor desirable. Moral and religious ideas are inherent in SEL, which is why they have always been connected.

To the extent that CASEL's categories of SEL are going to amount to anything more than empty phrases, they require the meat of concrete examples to be added to their dry bone of abstractions. Those concrete examples inevitably raise moral and religious issues. For example, if diligence or grit is part of self-management (or temperance), it would only be desirable to promote it if students were diligent in pursuit of a valuable end. Being gritty in one's ruthless ambition to dominate others would not generally be seen as praiseworthy. This trait is only good as part of a greater moral whole.

Similarly, growth mindset, which is part of self-awareness (or courage), is only desirable if students develop confidence to control their own success when such success is possible. Teaching students that they are responsible for their own progress would only lead to frustration and depression and conceal the true barriers to accomplishment if students were not truly in control of their own progress. Preaching that students should believe they are in control of their math progress when their formal instruction is horrible or nonexistent is simply unrealistic. Expecting students to pull themselves up by their bootstraps when they have no boots can be quite damaging. Context matters for SEL.

Connecting moral and religious instruction to SEL also appears to be the most effective strategy pedagogically. When teaching SEL, the biggest challenge lies in motivating students to internalize what they are being taught. Why should students be conscientious? Why should they believe they can improve outcomes for themselves and others through their own effort? Why should they be honest, punctual, and careful in their work? Simply telling students that these are desirable qualities does not make them believe it.

Telling them that their future employers will reward them is clearly insufficient. If pleasing their future corporate masters were enough, we wouldn't have to convince students to stay in school, keep out of trouble, and learn math and reading, let alone possess positive character attributes. Students would all be motivated on their own to improve their outcomes. Students require instruction and adult intervention to accomplish all these goals because the biggest challenge in education is motivation.

Religion is a particularly powerful motivator, especially with the moral and character issues embedded in SEL. If you don't believe me, consider that a large set of positive SEL qualities has historically been known as the "Protestant work ethic." Religion helps students understand *why* they should be concerned with others, why they should exert effort, and why they should be honest, punctual, and diligent. Religion is not the only source of personal mission or respect for the dignity of others, but it is clearly the most widespread and longest-standing method for producing these motivations. To abandon morality and religion when trying to teach SEL is to abandon almost every established instructional tool at our disposal.

How Has SEL Been Effective in the Past?

Given that SEL has been an educational priority for millennia and given its close connection to moral and religious instruction, how have past efforts been successful? The key has been the alignment of the moral and religious convictions of the students and their families with the instruction they are receiving.

Again, SEL or character goals are not meaningful as abstractions. Telling students they should be good or be kind or try hard doesn't mean anything without specifying *what* being good or being kind or trying hard really means and in what context that is required. Because different communities have legitimate differences in what they think these concepts mean, the contexts in which they are required, and the priority that should be given to each, how SEL is taught and the specific behaviors it emphasizes need to vary.

Historically, religious authorities mostly controlled education, and different religious communities would receive different educations aligned with their beliefs. In fact, this continues to be the case for most education systems around the globe.

Starting in the 19th century in a handful of industrializing Protestant countries, responsibility for education shifted to secular, governmental authorities. But even in those cases, education retained a strong moral and religious orientation. Horace Mann, often seen as the founder of governmental schooling in the US, favored the continuation of religious instruction in school with the reading of the King James Bible. He favored a less-sectarian education, but he still saw moral and religious instruction as a central responsibility of public education.

Well into the 20th century, most public schools in the US retained a vaguely Protestant flavor, with educational activities organized around Christian holidays, even as those holidays have become secularized. Participating in the Christmas choral concert, coloring Easter eggs, exchanging Valentine's Day cards, and dressing up for Halloween remained important school events that motivated many school lessons and activities, especially in elementary school. Schools would begin each day with a pledge that invoked God. Sports teams would regularly engage in prayer before their contests. And schools were careful to avoid teaching content that might offend local sensibilities or religious traditions, especially content involving sexual matters and evolution.

Even more important, public schooling in the US continued to emphasize the moral aspects of character education until relatively recently. Even with a watered-down religious orientation, public schooling did not shy away from the moral nature of character education. This was possible because education remained very much under local control at least into the 1960s.

There were well over 100,000 school districts in the country in 1940. By 1970, that number had dropped below 18,000, and there are fewer than 14,000 today.[4] In 1940, there was no federal department of education, and state departments of education remained small and weak. This incredibly local control allowed character education in schools to reflect the values and religious traditions of the communities in which those schools were located.

This alignment of communities' values with the content and method of character education was essential to its effectiveness. Schools would be reluctant to teach values or employ methods of

character education that were inconsistent with local preferences given that those schools were democratically accountable. In addition, character education in school is more likely to succeed if it is being reinforced, or at least not being contradicted, in students' homes.

The Modern SEL Movement

As education became centralized, SEL or character education has begun to disappear from schools. The formation of much larger public school districts increased the heterogeneity of values and religious traditions within districts, often making character education too contentious and dissuading schools from taking the political risks of engaging in it.

Much larger districts also made schools less accountable to the character education goals of any particular constituency by diluting each community's influence in school elections. In addition, larger districts reduced the influence of the Tiebout choice, whereby people vote with their feet, by making it more difficult for families to relocate to other districts that might more closely reflect their value preferences. That is, big districts are both less responsive to each individual voter and less subject to market competition for residents, making it less likely that schools would give priority to the character education that any individual or community prefers.

In addition, more muscular state and federal initiatives have reduced the likelihood that schools would attend to character education. The general increase in centralized regulation has made school districts less able and willing to attend to their communities' particular character education preferences. Specifically, state and federal regulations have shifted school attention to performance on math and reading standardized tests. If schools believe they will be rewarded or punished for math and reading results but experience no consequences from state and federal regulators for character education, they have every reason to focus their energy on math and reading instruction and neglect other traditional educational responsibilities, including character formation.

The more answerable districts are to state and federal regulators, the less accountable they are to local voters. If families approach the district to complain about its inattention to character education, district officials can, sometimes falsely, claim that the demands of state and federal requirements prohibit them from teaching character education. When districts had one relatively homogenous constituency to which they were answerable, schools could feel more comfortable or at least be compelled to satisfy local character education preferences. When district loyalties are divided between local voters and distant bureaucrats, that comfort and accountability are greatly reduced.

Even if people didn't understand why character education disappeared over the past few decades, they noticed and were alarmed by its absence. The SEL movement is a reaction to this educational void. But rather than learning from and building on its long history, SEL advocates seem determined to build their effort from scratch on a secular and technocratic basis.

Even if people didn't understand why character education disappeared over the past few decades, they noticed and were alarmed by its absence.

I've already discussed how SEL has de-emphasized character education or any suggestion of teaching morality with its rebranding of the cardinal virtues. In addition, SEL seeks to appeal to elites' secular and scientific preferences by using psychological concepts, attempting to develop and validate psychological scales to measure those concepts, and then using those measures to centrally manage improvement in SEL goals.

Unfortunately, the scientific foundation is not strong or broad enough to support this effort. Psychology does not offer a clear demarcation of the different SEL goals. How is grit really different from conscientiousness or effort? How is growth mindset really different from locus of control or self-confidence? These concepts blur into each other because our underlying thinking is unclear. These SEL goals are highly abstract and ambiguous because

they mask underlying differences in concrete moral preferences and priorities.

Not surprisingly, fuzzy psychological concepts are not readily or consistently measured. For example, how gritty students rate themselves depends heavily on whom they are comparing themselves against; hardworking students at Berkeley have been reported to see themselves as slackers.[5] Measuring these abstract concepts depends on specific context.

Because the psychological concepts are fuzzy and the measures are highly sensitive to context, any attempt to centrally command and control progress toward SEL goals is a fool's errand. These SEL measures are also easily gamed and manipulated if used for anything beyond research purposes. Rather than attempting to build another SEL accountability category to add to math and reading, with all the flaws of that existing system compounded, SEL advocates need to accept that these goals cannot be advanced on a purely secular, amoral, and scientific basis.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Rather than reinvent SEL, its supporters would do well to embrace and learn from its long history. The lessons I would draw do not focus on the mechanics of how SEL should be taught or measured, as much as advocates and practitioners are eager to focus on those issues. Instead, there are broader issues related to how schooling is structured that hinder or facilitate effective SEL instruction. Unless we take a few steps back to consider these broader issues, our efforts on the mechanics will be wasted.

Accept that SEL goals involve questions of morality, which in turn are embedded in religious traditions. SEL does not necessarily require religious education, but it shouldn't shy away from its moral and religious roots. Doing so will wipe some of the flaky, New Age feeling away from SEL and allow it to draw support from a broad section of the country that is legitimately concerned with the values that their children are learning.

This would mean encouraging communities to illustrate abstract SEL concepts with concrete moral examples and models that are meaningful within their context. These moral examples and models will vary, but they could invoke the Good Samaritan in some communities, Hillel in others, and Rosa Parks in yet others. They might motivate empathy and mutual respect by emphasizing that everyone is "endowed by their Creator" with the same entitlement to human dignity and worth. Morality and religion help explain why SEL goals are valuable, and those goals cannot meaningfully be advanced without providing that foundation.

Acknowledge that effective SEL requires local control. SEL advocates should push for decentralizing control over education so that local and voluntary communities can align SEL instruction with their moral preferences in ways that make its abstract concepts meaningful and accessible to each community. Different communities have legitimate differences over the concrete moral examples of SEL concepts. Rather than obscuring those differences with vague and unhelpful language or coercing those who disagree into compliance with scientific authority, SEL advocates need to embrace the moral diversity that effective SEL instruction requires. Common Core efforts ran into this buzz saw by neglecting legitimate differences in local educational preferences, and SEL would do well to avoid a similar catastrophic error.

Recognize that school choice would help but is not necessary for effective SEL. When parents choose schools, they can form a voluntary community of shared values that would facilitate effective SEL instruction. But the reality is that many more families have and will continue to form voluntary communities of shared values by choosing to live in areas and neighborhoods with others who have a similar background and worldview. Decentralizing control over school would allow those residential communities to be more effective in SEL instruction without needing choice programs.

Avoid attempting to centrally manage SEL. As tempting as it is for elites to try to ensure the promotion of SEL goals by centrally measuring and incentivizing them, doing so is almost certain to be counterproductive. SEL instruction can only be effective if local communities authentically adopt and pursue it, which requires that they be allowed to put their own moral preferences into SEL abstractions. External efforts to measure or manage them only undermine this.

Conclusion

Most of this advice cuts against the grain of the modern education reform movement. Reformers have been wary of moral and religious education, preferring to focus on workplace-related skills. They have pushed the centralization of education through tighter regulation and testing. And they have prioritized the scientific measurement and centralized management of outcomes.

But the unintended effect of these efforts has been to undermine the character education that has long been a central responsibility of our education system. If SEL advocates want to reverse the disappearance of character education, they will need to reverse many of the reforms that unwittingly drove SEL out of schools.

The broad lessons I am offering may seem overly abstract to SEL advocates who are eager to learn how specific SEL skills could be taught and measured. But without considering the historical and structural context of SEL instruction, none of these mechanical considerations will matter. The main challenge with SEL is not how to do it, but what social and political conditions allow any approaches to be effective.

About the Author

Jay P. Greene is distinguished professor and chair of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. Greene has written or edited three books and has been published in a variety of academic journals. He received a BA in history from Tufts University and a PhD from the Government Department at Harvard University.

Notes

1. Aspen Institute, National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, *From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope*, January 15, 2019, http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation/.
2. Francis MacDonald Conford, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).
3. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, "Core SEL Competencies," https://casel.org/core-competencies/.
4. National Center for Education Statistics, "Number of Public School Districts and Public and Private Elementary and Secondary Schools: Selected Years, 1869–70 Through 2010–11," https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_098.asp.
5. Martin R. West et al., "Promise and Paradox: Measuring Students' Non-Cognitive Skills and the Impact of Schooling" (working paper, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, February 2014), https://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/cepr-promise-paradox.pdf.