How Social and Emotional Learning Can Succeed

By Jal Mehta

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Key Points

- In a field in which it is often claimed that nothing works, social and emotional learning (SEL) has a track record of verifiable, if modest, success.
- SEL has succeeded by meeting real demand for its services, setting modest and specific goals, and avoiding a one-size-fits-all mentality.
- The most promising approaches integrate academics and SEL schoolwide, rather than making SEL a set-aside program.
- Meanwhile, policymakers should be wary of mandating SEL; there is no faster way to lose support for an initiative than to require that everyone take part.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is having a moment. After years of being neglected for an agenda heavily focused on test scores, the pendulum is swinging back toward the whole child. The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act asks states to develop at least one metric, outside reading and math scores, to measure school quality.[1] The Aspen Commission on Social and Emotional Learning recently released a report, with much fanfare, that lays out an ambitious policy, practice, and research agenda for SEL.[2] Many states have adopted SEL standards, and schools and districts are increasingly incorporating these dimensions into their work.

In a field in which it is often claimed that nothing works, SEL has a track record of verifiable, if modest, success. SEL has succeeded by meeting real demand for its services; setting modest and specific goals; matching the needed support, materials, and training to these goals; and avoiding a one-size-fits-all mentality.

In contrast, previous efforts that took a different track—offering broad visions and promising large change with few specific means to achieve them—were felled by a predictable set of political and organizational dynamics. Given that, the SEL movement must avoid overreach, continue to pursue the slow and steady path it has been on, and avoid the temptation to use its moment in the sun to take a shortcut to the finish line. Conversely, if SEL moves to converge on a single model, spreads too quickly, or mandates its use, it will undermine its own progress.

Furthermore, this slow and steady approach is particularly important given the growing desire for a more integrated approach to SEL. Much of the existing work has largely been focused on developing discrete *programs*. But, an increasing consensus among experts is that the preferable approach to SEL is to *integrate* it with academic learning and across a school's culture.[3] In this vision, SEL cannot be done in prescribed chunks once a week, but rather must become part of the fabric of how all adults and children relate to one another in a school.

Building this culture requires careful cultivation by those in a school community; it can be supported but not prescribed from above. Thus, I suggest that

those who want to spread the movement need to eschew mandates and use other forces for social change—education, movement building, persuasion, evidence, and more—to gradually and sustainably spread SEL across the nation's many schools.

Unpacking SEL's Definitions

When defining SEL, many different terms and sources might come to mind. A few definitions stand out as the most widely cited and accepted, but even they contain an array of ideas. The core group advocating for SEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), argues that there are five core competencies, including self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision-making.[4] Leading SEL researcher Stephanie Jones argues that we should think of SEL as developing skills that fall into three interconnected domains: (1) cognitive regulation, including the basic ability to direct one's efforts toward a goal; (2) emotional competencies; and (3) social and interpersonal skills.[5]

Any parent would recognize these definitions as important goals they would hope to develop in their children; any teacher would see them as key competencies that students need to develop to build functioning classrooms and schools. But from an analytic perspective, they are a bit fuzzy in two respects: (1) They cover a wide swath of more specific psychological constructs (e.g., conscientiousness, executive functioning, etc.) without specifically pinpointing all those sub-constructs and how they relate, and (2) they are broad and aspirational and, thus, require much more specific instantiations if they are going to guide actual practice.

Further, as Jay Greene has described in more detail, the contemporary approach to SEL strikingly seeks to remove the older moral and religious roots of character education and instead develop a secular and scientific basis for many of these same characteristics.[6] This has the advantage of drawing on the legitimacy associated with science to make the case for SEL, and it allows advocates to sidestep political controversy. But, as I will suggest below, if SEL is going to become a more integrated and powerful force in schools, it will likely need to more directly take up the questions of the relationship between the skills and competencies it is describing and the broader issue of the purpose of schooling in each community.

Why Education Reforms Sometimes Succeed

In a paper David Cohen and I wrote in 2017, we argued that the idea that education reform never works has been overblown. We suggest instead that some conditions explain why reforms sometimes succeed. Namely:

- They solve a problem teachers think they have rather than a problem reformers wish teachers thought they had;
- They are consistent with prevailing norms and values;
- They either are consistent with what teachers already know how to do or provide the needed tools, infrastructure, and practical guidance needed to enable teachers to achieve the goals they set out; and
- In a locally controlled and decentralized system, they continually win public support for their objectives across many districts and school communities.

The creation of the public school system in the first place, the building of schools for the freed people, the shift to age-graded schooling, the creation of extracurricular activities and electives, and, more recently, the use of "do nows" and "exit tickets" are examples of reforms that meet these conditions and have spread and been sustained across the system. Reforms that have been unable to mount these conditions systemwide can succeed in what we call niches—smaller spaces in which the above conditions can be met. Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and Montessori are examples of niche reforms.[7]

This analysis of why reforms sometimes succeed is linked to a broader structural analysis of the US education system. The US system has historically been highly decentralized, weakly professionalized, and subject to high levels of lay control in the form of local school boards. The result is the US cannot reform the way more centralized, ministry-led

nations do. In Singapore, the central government can define a new set of objectives, create an aligned curriculum, prepare all teachers according to those criteria at the one centrally run teacher preparation institution, retrain all existing teachers in that curriculum, and align expectations for those schools around those goals.

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In the United States, we have 50 states, more than 1,300 teacher preparation programs,[8] and 14,000 districts, each with its own goals and expectations.[9] In this world, reforms that succeed have to win support repeatedly across different states, districts, and schools, and they need to be consistent with the underlying values of those different communities, building a political constituency in each. Lacking centralized control in a loosely coupled system, successful reforms also need to address problems that teachers perceive as salient to them, which creates the condition for willing adoption. Lacking widespread professionalized norms and training for practice, they have to provide the needed guidance that enables teachers to enact these reforms.

Three Reasons Why SEL Can Succeed. These criteria can explain why SEL has achieved some modest success. A 2011 meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL interventions found that "compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement."[10] A subsequent meta-analysis from 2017, drawing on 82 studies of school-based SEL interventions, found that "follow-up outcomes (collected 6 months to 18 years post-intervention) demonstrate SEL's enhancement of positive youth development. Participants fared significantly better than controls in social-emotional skills, attitudes, and indicators of well-being."[11] Thus, the available evidence shows that, on the whole, SEL interventions have had measurably positive effects.

Why have these programs worked when so many others have failed? It starts with *demand*. As Richard Elmore has observed, there is no shortage of supply of possible educational solutions; what is missing is demand, from teachers, for new ways of doing things. SEL has the major virtue that there is considerable demand. Parents want their children to be able to manage their emotions, get along with others, and regulate themselves in ways that allow them to achieve goals. Teachers similarly value those skills because they enable students to be ready to learn. Ninety-three percent of teachers in a nationally representative poll say that it is very or fairly important for schools to promote SEL.[12] Teachers also overwhelmingly believe that building social and emotional skills will improve relationships among students and teachers, reduce bullying, and increase academic achievement.[13]

Thus, while, as Greene points out, the moral and religious origins of these virtues have been largely stripped away in public schools, demand remains widespread. The good news, then, for advocates is that, in a decentralized system, SEL can diffuse quickly and be continually adopted across schools and districts.

A second factor is that the programs that have worked are much more specific in their aims and more modest in their goals than the broad SEL language described above. Individual interventions, especially at the preschool and elementary levels in which SEL is most popular, generally focus on targeting particular skills—and providing the needed supports to achieve them. A compendium that provides a typology of 25 leading elementary school programs finds that some target cognitive regulation, others focus on understanding emotions, and still others primarily focus on interpersonal skills.[14] This specificity is a key part of their success.

A third factor is that SEL has not been one-size-fits-all. Most SEL programs, especially the ones that have proven track records of results, have focused on preschool or elementary school students. We take from this not that older students don't need to build these skills, but rather that what SEL programs are offering fits better with the culture

of elementary schools, which, compared to high schools, are more interested in students as whole people and less exclusively focused on subject-matter content. Even in elementary schools, successful programs are developmentally appropriate, focused on particular skills that fit particular ages.

There are also implicit ideological differences among the programs. Many programs, particularly those serving younger children, essentially assume that the social order is just and the role of school is to fit students to that social order. As these values are widely shared among many parents and communities, these programs have been widely adopted. Conversely, programs such as Facing History and Ourselves, which invites students to examine the past more critically, have been voluntarily adopted in schools and districts where faculty, parents, and communities welcome that historical approach. The point is that the SEL movement has evolved to seeking advantageous terrain, rather than acting as a bulldozer seeking to raze everything in its path.

Three Cautionary Tales: The Self-Esteem Movement, No Child Left Behind, and England's Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning. If the above shows conditions under which SEL can succeed, there are also some ways it could go astray. Especially as greater funding becomes available, it will be tempting to try to push SEL where there is no real demand for its services, to make it a broad umbrella that loses the specificity of what makes it valuable, and to mandate its use. History suggests that this path is the fastest way to undermine support for the SEL agenda.

Consider the self-esteem movement of the 1980s. Here advocates took the kernel of truth that higher self-esteem was correlated with higher achievement and embraced the dubious theory that raising self-esteem would increase academic achievement. This movement failed for a number of what in retrospect were predictable reasons; advocates went for a major campaign before establishing a clear causal link between their key constructs. They pushed an agenda for which there was no clear demand (no teacher ever said, "I wish I had a program to boost my kids' self-esteem"), and they provided little practical guidance for how to achieve their ends. Mocked by *Doonesbury* and *Saturday Night Live*, the self-esteem movement is still cited by SEL opponents, illustrating the backlash that can occur when badly thought-out programs are rushed to scale.

A second cautionary tale is No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This was not an SEL intervention, but it does illustrate the folly of taking some smaller truths and trying to turn them into an overwhelming legislative mandate. Unlike the self-esteem movement, NCLB drew on some real research findings; namely, that teachers are the most important school-level factor in shaping student outcomes and that high expectations are an important factor in school success.[15]

But when NCLB took these findings and declared that every school improve in reading and math to 100 percent proficient by 2014, it vastly overreached and defied the laws of social physics. In so doing, it set utopian goals, demanded accountability without a corresponding strategy to build capacity, alienated teachers, and drew ire from many parents and educators who saw it as narrowing the curriculum and promoting teaching to the test. SEL is at a similar moment: Some advocates are encouraging that SEL become mandated as part of state and district accountability systems. If SEL doesn't want to replay the mistakes of NCLB, it needs to avoid this temptation.[16]

Another trap to avoid is scaling without careful attention to the underlying mechanisms, local context, and political will needed to support growth. The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program in England illustrates these dynamics. SEAL is a whole-school approach designed to positively influence a range of pupil outcomes, including increased social and emotional skills, better behavior, and reduced mental health difficulties. It had shown success as a pilot and then was implemented across 22 schools and 19 matched comparison schools.

In contrast to much of the literature, which has shown the success of such efforts, the evaluations showed no significant effects on students' social and emotional skills and mental health difficulties. The reason, the study's authors concluded, was that

the broader SEL literature reports primarily on *efficacy* trials: that is, programmes delivered under well-controlled circumstances with high levels of resources to promote implementation and monitor fidelity. This evaluation, by contrast, is essentially an *effectiveness* trial; that is, a more pragmatic evaluation of practice delivered in real-life settings.[17]

Quotations from the teachers in the study supported this interpretation. Said one, "You get the, 'isn't it just another one of these ideas from the government that will fade out? We'll do it for a couple of years and then it'll be . . . we've got another idea now.'" Another said, "I've got fifty minutes and my priority is that they leave the room . . . knowing about particle theory, you know, the fact that they're emotionally illiterate, well really . . . it's not your problem is it?"[18]

Thus, the SEAL program, implemented at scale, reveals the more familiar pattern that we see in the implementation literature; namely, something that worked in pilot form does not work at scale because it hasn't built the needed knowledge, skill, and particularly commitment of those who are expected to implement it.

How SEL Can Be Integrated into Schools

While much of the existing SEL work has focused on discrete programs that build particular skills, in the longer run, there is increasing consensus that SEL should not be set aside but rather integrated into the school's fabric.

I have been running a community of practice that includes both Canadian and American educators. Notably, American educators tend to talk about SEL as if it is distinct, separate from academic learning, which needs to be attended to with its own programming, funding streams, and metrics. Canadian educators just tend to talk about kids, sometimes wonderful, sometimes maddening, but always as whole children whose various parts of their selves need to be attended to. SEL is less something you *do* and more part of who you *are*, and thus the most successful approaches to SEL take an integrated stance.

Three examples of school-wide approaches to SEL are Reggio Emilia, expeditionary learning, and James P. Comer schools. Each approach has an integrated vision that unites academic and social and emotional aspects of learning. They also have succeeded and been sustained by attending to many of the same success factors identified above—being specific about their vision, providing training and practical guidance, cultivating teacher and parental support, growing only where there is demand for their services, and avoiding some of the traps that have felled other efforts at SEL.

Reggio Emilia is an approach to preschool and elementary education that stems from the city of the same name in Italy. Its core beliefs are that children are active agents of their learning, learn through art and play, and can be taught how to relate to one another and solve their own interpersonal dilemmas. As such, it has a shared stance that unites the academic and social and emotional domains, which allows young children to experience a consistent approach across the school day.

There is also a parallelism in SEL's view of teachers, who are seen as collaborators in learning with the children and researchers and documenters of children's thinking. Teachers learn the approach by visiting Reggio Emilia schools (including the original schools in Italy) and frequently work as co-teachers, which allows existing teachers to apprentice new teachers into the approach. Finally, as a network of mostly private preschools, it is largely not subject to state accountability requirements that might be inconsistent with its approach. Reggio Emilia solves the problem of commitment by self-selection, as both teachers and parents have opted into these networks, meaning they are more likely to be found in areas where parents have progressive visions of schooling and childhood.

Expeditionary learning (EL) is a second example. EL education is a network of more than 150 schools, including both charter and traditional public, that takes a constructivist stance toward student learning but also seeks to boost test scores and help its students succeed by conventional metrics. EL uses a lengthy courting process before taking on new schools: Faculty at those schools need to learn about EL's philosophy and methods, and then they vote—at least 80 percent must agree—to support EL's adoption. EL also provides schools with a

school developer and a "train the trainer" model in which external support is gradually removed as schools become increasingly knowledgeable about the methods.

Substantively, EL's stance toward instruction—favoring student projects and student inquiry, including many opportunities for revision and the goal of producing beautiful work—integrates the social-emotional and the academic into a single stance that unites the quality of a student's work with the quality of his or her character. As a program that began with its roots in Outward Bound, EL is the rare mainstream organization willing to talk openly and honestly about the importance of character and sees its mission as developing students who will contribute to a better world. EL brings together many elements of successful reforms: local demand, practical guidance and support, and addressing problems that teachers see, in this case how to engage students while also helping them succeed on state metrics.

The Comer school development model is a particularly salient example because it is specifically focused on the needs of disadvantaged children in traditional public schools. Established in 1968 by Yale University psychiatrist James P. Comer, it has now spread to more than 1,000 schools across 26 states. The philosophy of Comer schools emphasizes integrating the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical while focusing on helping teachers understand the principles of positive child development. The Comer process is not a fixed program or set of steps, but rather a process that begins with a contextual analysis to help schools identify how they can best incorporate the Comer principles in their settings.

Research on the Comer process has found that it does boost academic achievement and social-emotional functioning; it also finds that the program's success is directly related to the commitment of school and district personnel to implementing the Comer approach.[19] By cultivating local demand, providing tools for how to do the work, and then offering a tailored approach that positions local teachers as experts and seeks to address what they see as their most pressing problems, the Comer school model has created a successful, scalable, and sustainable model that integrates social-emotional and academic learning.[20]

How Could SEL Spread Effectively?

What are the implications of this analysis for how SEL advocates should spread their practices? The SEAL example suggests that the approach of some higher power—be it a state or district—requiring that many schools implement a particular program, even one with some flexibility, will likely result in resistance and, at best, mixed effects. The NCLB example suggests that setting standards and holding people accountable from above will have similar consequences. Thus, the most obvious approaches to scale are not likely to work and, if NCLB and the self-esteem movement are any guide, are likely to engender the kind of resistance that will ultimately bring down a worthy objective.

What if we turned our view around and thought about it not from the perspective of the sector as a whole but from the perspective of an individual school leader—let's call her Shellie—who is interested in incorporating SEL into her school's practices? What was a daunting proposition from the point of view of the whole now looks much more promising from the individual school leader's perspective.

Shellie could convene various stakeholders including parents, teachers, students, and community members to define a vision for SEL at her school. She could conduct a needs assessment to assess what particular challenges and opportunities exist in her environment and align her SEL strategy accordingly. She could draw on many available resources provided by SEL advocates and other external providers as she and her teachers work to integrate the school's developing vision of SEL with the school's academic priorities.

Shellie could task teachers to think about possible points of integration between SEL and the academic content they are already teaching. She could organize a professional learning strategy that is tailored to the strengths, capacity, and knowledge of her teachers and that would help everyone learn new ways of teaching and working. And most importantly, Shellie could model, in all her actions with teachers, students, and parents, conviction in why it is important to develop students holistically, which would help everyone own the shift we are seeking.[21]

In this scenario, the mechanism for spread is less command and control and more diffusion or contagion; as some schools see the benefits of making these shifts, others will follow suit. A

2017 CASEL national survey of principals found that 35 percent of principals had developed a school-wide plan for teaching students social and emotional skills and were systematically implementing it, 38 percent had developed a plan and were partially implementing it, 20 percent were in the process of developing such a plan, and 7 percent had not developed plans.[22]

The authors of the report emphasized the lack of full implementation—only 35 percent had fully implemented a school-wide SEL plan—but it is just as plausible to see this as a sign of enormous progress. There are more than 100,000 schools in America; if 35,000 have a school-wide SEL approach, that is a huge number of schools, teachers, and students. Partial implementation or having developed a plan but not yet implemented it are also signs of progress. In a huge, decentralized nation, this is how massive change looks—patchy, faster in some parts than others, but gradually penetrating the nation's many districts and schools.

How SEL Can Succeed: Four Lessons Learned

Looking across these varied examples of success and failure, four lessons for SEL advocates stand out.

Integrate Academic and Social and Emotional Learning. Naming the importance of SEL was a key counterweight to the math and reading–only focus of the NCLB era. But ultimately, cognitive science and common sense show that it is all connected. The brain helps regulate emotions; when students are not in a good place socially and emotionally, it is difficult for them to learn.

Furthermore, if SEL is not reduced to a once-a-week activity, it needs to be interwoven into the large majority of students' academic tasks. Good teachers have long known that building the right kind of climate and culture is crucial to a successful classroom; thus, there are ample opportunities for this kind of integration. Conversely, if the message given during "SEL time" is not reinforced by the daily norms and routines that govern classroom behavior, students will be quick to spot the hypocrisy, and it is unlikely the SEL lessons will stick. The most promising school-wide approaches, discussed above, all have an integrated vision of academic and social and emotional learning.

Avoid One-Size-Fits-All Approaches. SEL has been most successful when it has been specific about its goals and the clients it serves, and it has floundered when it has tried to be all things to all people. Successful SEL interventions and whole-school models are clear in what they are trying to accomplish, and they are transparent about these purposes and the values underlying them. In a highly varied country, we are more likely to succeed with a multitude of approaches than with one lowest common denominator strategy. The implication for the funding community is that it should continue to support various models and approaches, asking each to provide some evidence of its efficacy, rather than seeking to create a new one best way to do SEL.

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Stimulate Demand but Don't Mandate. There is no faster way to lose support for an initiative than to require that everyone take part. And there is no faster way to corrupt an initiative than to put high stakes on its outcomes. Given that SEL measurement is still in its infancy, and much of it still rests on self-reporting, it seems particularly unwise to take an NCLB-type approach.

Rather, SEL advocates should use some other levers of social change. In particular, they should continue to mount a national campaign calling attention to the ways in which youth today are not having their social and emotional needs met, using quantitative indicators and powerful narratives to illustrate the varied dimensions of this problem. They should encourage local communities to perform needs assessments, which would more specifically pinpoint what problems and opportunities exist in

particular communities and thus which solutions or approaches would be appropriate.

Increase the Supply of Models and Practical Guidance. If SEL advocates successfully incite increased demand for their models, they should be ready to guide how to implement their approaches and continue to develop whole-school models that fit different communities and their needs.

While approaches need to be adapted to meet local communities' needs, there is no reason that every community has to entirely reinvent the wheel. In particular, continuing to build and fund intermediaries that can develop models, write practical guidance, provide on-the-ground consulting and support, and build an evidence base are pivotal for accelerating the movement. If history is a guide, for ideas to succeed, their progenitors have to provide materials, guidance, and human support; ideas on their own rarely, if ever, translate consistently into practice without this foundational infrastructure. Such a set of strategies, if pursued in tandem, could lead to even more widespread adoption of SEL reforms across a vast and decentralized system and, perhaps more importantly, lead to those reforms being locally owned in a way that will make them sustainable.

Conclusion

In her landmark study of policy implementation, Milbrey McLaughlin famously concluded that "you can't mandate what matters."[23] This aphorism seems particularly relevant when considering SEL; you particularly can't mandate that students show one another empathy or that schools build healthy emotional climates.

But history suggests that reforms do sometimes succeed and that they do so when they build demand, provide tools, solve problems that teachers think that they have, and are consistent with local norms and values. The SEL movement has come a long way in a relatively short time by doing exactly that; if it resists the temptation to overreach and continues to mobilize the many levers of social change, it can develop the multifaceted and varied approach to SEL that our sprawling nation deserves.

About the Author

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