

## School Closure and Distance Learning Gain and Experience: A New Perspective View to Look beyond Learning Loss

Abdalla Mohamed

Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia

**Abstract:** Recognizing the limitations of how “learning loss” is conceptualized and measured, this study is attempted to draw lessons by exploring the bright side of school closure and distance learning during COVID-19. The main research question is “What, in reality, valuable experiences are students gained during school closure and distance learning due to COVID-19?”. The study used the results of the debate launched by the New York Times in September 2021. The discussion was about the impact of school closure and distance learning on the various aspects of learning. More than 400 students participated in the discussion. This study focuses on some of the students' responses (37 students) regarding their experiences and the positive side of distance learning (i.e., Learning gains) during school closure. The OECD's framework for social and emotional skills is adopted to identify and categorize the students' responses. The study finds that 18 students (49 %) mentioned that they have valuable experience (i.e., learning gains) related to the “people-mindedness “task performance” domains of the OECD's framework for social and emotional skills. At the skills level, the soft skills of “curiosity”, “sociability” cited by 13 students (35%). Next “self- efficiency 10 students (27%) and then “empathy” 9 students (24%). The experiences and lessons learned can be categorized as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. That is, which represents the main components of any educating and learning system and competencies. The study concluded that success in education builds not just cognitive but character fortitude. It is important to recognize the introduction of social and emotional skills, students' well-being, and social relations in the school environment. The interconnected development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills starts during early infancy and continues throughout one's lifespan. Social and emotional skills are widely incorporated into corporate and organizational values.

**Keywords:** School Closure, Distance Learning, Learning Gain, Learning Loss.

**Citation:** Mohamed, A. (2023). School Closure and Distance Learning Gain and Experience: A New Perspective View to Look beyond Learning Loss. In M. Shelley, M. Unal, & S. Turgut (Eds.), *Proceedings of IHSES 2023—International Conference on Humanities, Social and Education Sciences* (pp. 207-217), Denver, CO, USA. ISTES Organization.

### Introduction

School closures have been a standard tool in the battle against COVID-19. However, their costs and benefits remain insufficiently known. The suspension of face-to-face instruction in schools during the COVID-19

pandemic has led to concerns about consequences for students learning. Three main approaches or frames are adopted for measuring and tackling learning loss. The psychometric, the commercial, and the economical (see Figure 1).

Categories of approaches and frameworks for measuring learning loss	Description
The psychometric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Here learning loss is framed as predicted skills deficits caused by reduced school time school, which would result in weaker workforce capacity, reduced income for individuals, overall ‘human capital’ deficiencies for nations, and thereby reduced gross domestic product.</li> <li>• Recommended by OECD and the World Bank</li> </ul>
The commercial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emphasizes the deployment of psychometric tests of the cognitive development of children not in school.</li> <li>• Adopted by international assessment programs: PIRLS, TIMMS, and PISA</li> </ul>
The economical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Here, the tests only measure reading and math, so don’t count for anything else we might think of as ‘learning’.</li> <li>• This is marketed by the testing companies such as Illuminate, Curriculum Associates, and Renaissance and the consultancy McKinsey and Company</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Approaches and Frameworks for Measuring Learning Loss.

Here, learning loss is defined as predicted cognitive knowledge and skills deficits caused by reduced time in school based on the number of months during which schools are closed and in no in-person education (i.e., Distance –learning). None of the existing approaches and frameworks were attempted to study and investigate what students have gained and experienced during school closure and distance learning.

**Limitations of the existing approaches and frameworks.**

Many educators and professors criticized, as follows, how learning loss is conceptualized and measured:

- Students learned immeasurable and previously unknowable things, like how to reset the rhythms and patterns of their days. They've learned more than previous cohorts of students. That is because of what they have lived through and lived without. That is acquired social and emotional skills (soft skills).
- The most radical form of this critique maintains that students haven't missed out on any learning at all; they've just learned different, and possibly more valuable, things.
- 62% of teachers say that students made less progress this past school year than they would have before the pandemic. While, only 24% of parents believed that was true, and 42% said students made more progress.
- Learning loss has become a commercial opportunity not just for testing companies delivering the tests, but for the wider EdTech and educational resources industry seeking to market learning 'catch-up' solutions to schools and families.

Students are talking about what they have learned during school closure and distance learning. That is, including technology skills, global awareness, and resilience.

As Taia student from Chicago wrote:

“How can anything being taught in outdated textbooks ever compare to the real-world experiences we as students have gained in 2020-2021?”

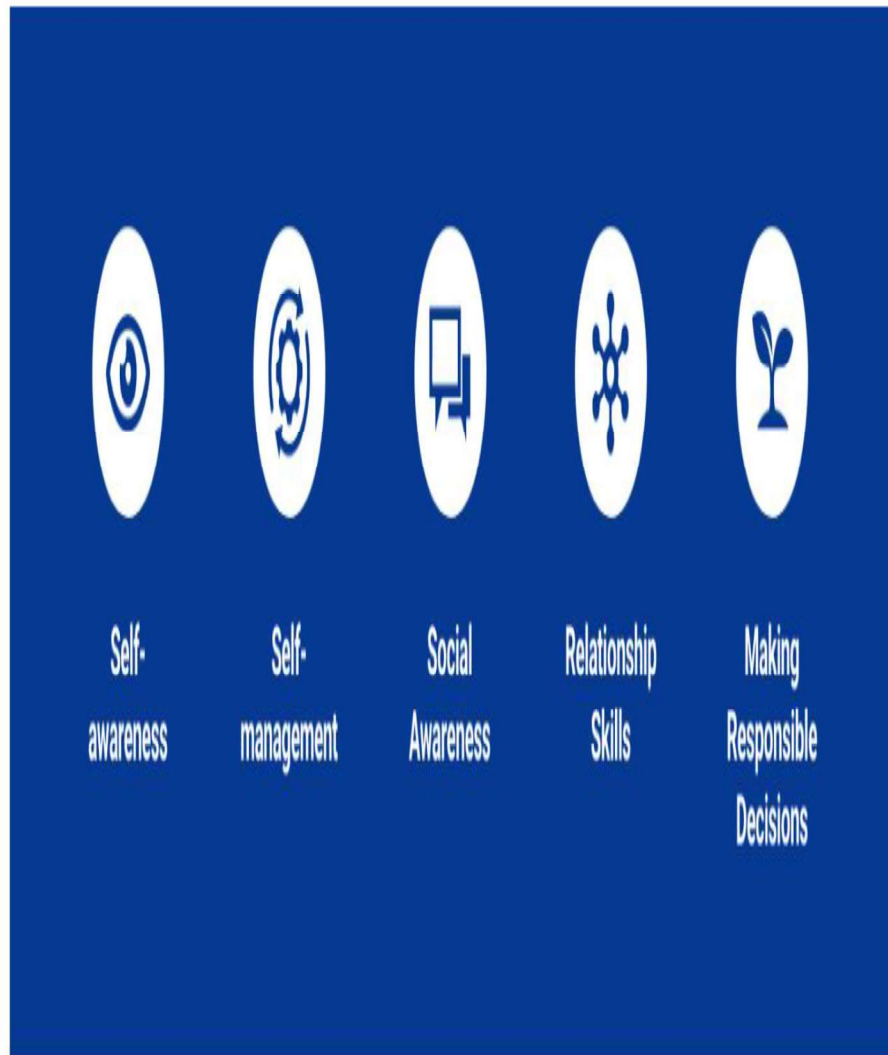
An educator commented “The 2020–21 scholastic year doesn't need a disclaimer. It needs a celebration.”

### **Aim and Research Questions.**

This study is attempted to draw lessons by exploring the bright side of school closure and distance learning during COVID-19. That is namely the “learning gain”.

To achieve such an aim and to get a better sense of what “learning gain” really means, this study asked and answered the following main questions:

- What, in reality, valuable experiences are students gained during school closure and distance learning due to COVID-19?
- Can the experiences acquired be regarded as “learning gain” or skills? How categorized?
- How do they gain skills and interact with other learning and education aspects?
- How are the “learning gain” and skills suitable and meet the needs of corporations, workplaces, and employers?
- In addition: Validating the OECD social and emotional skills (SE) framework.



### Learning Gain

Students learned immeasurable and previously unknowable things, like how to reset the rhythms and patterns of their days. They've learned more than previous cohorts of students. That is because of what they have lived through and lived without. That is acquired social and emotional skills (soft skills). This brings us to learning gain – the idea that students are successfully gaining knowledge in new ways.

- Students are in families and communities, learning about what it means to be constrained, learning about their relationship with digital resources, and even learning about the human condition.
- Some parents report that digital learning has given their kids a new interest in school, and more confidence to be themselves, in a space that's more humane and freer of micro-aggressions. Many teachers have even noticed improved academic performance in their

classes.

- There's a lot of talk about learning loss, but teachers can guide students to reflect on all the ways they've grown during the pandemic.
- One teacher stated that "It would be a shame to return to normal without acknowledging any growth that occurred during the pandemic. A reflection that helps us learn more about our students and celebrate their accomplishments and resilience is the perfect way to begin this year".

## Methods

### Meaning of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is a methodology that helps students of all ages to better comprehend their emotions, feel those emotions fully, and demonstrate empathy for others. Five categories are known for SLE skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and making responsible decisions. These learned skills are then used to help students make positive, responsible decisions; create frameworks to achieve their goals, and build positive relationships with others.

Social and emotional (SE) skills, can be defined as, individual capacities that:

- are manifested in consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors,
- can be developed through formal and informal learning experiences, and
- influence important socioeconomic outcomes throughout the individual's life" (OECD 2015, p. 34).

SE skills predict a variety of important outcomes, which include, but are not limited to, health (Bogg and Roberts 2004), academic performance (Chernyshenko et al. 2018; Mammadov 2021; Poropat 2009), and job performance (Barrick et al. 2001; Zell and Lesick 2021).

### The Study Framework

This study adopted the OECD framework which categorized learned social and emotional skills (SE), into six personality traits. Each of these domains is further specified in terms of skills or facets that represent more specific aspects of individuals' capability (see Figures 2 and 3).

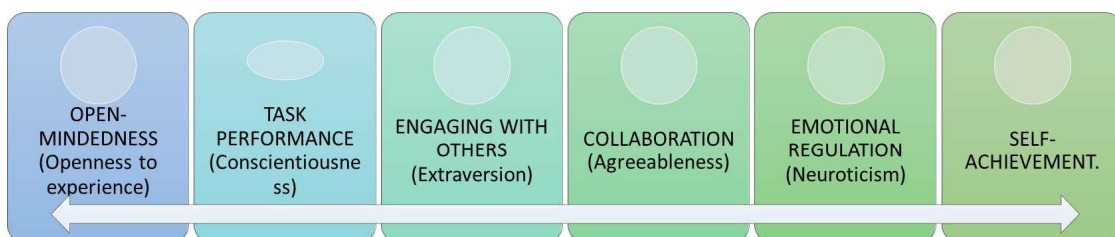


Figure 2: OECD Framework for Social and emotional skills domains



Figure 3: OECD Framework for Social and emotional skills traits

Source of data: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/learning/what-students-are-saying-about-learning-loss-during-the-pandemic.html>

### Source of data

In September 2021, the New York Times launched a debate about the impact of school closure and distance learning on the various aspects of learning. More than 400 students participated in the debate. This study used the responses of 37 students regarding their experiences and the positive side of distance learning (i.e., Learning gains) to them during school closure.

### Results and Findings

Table 1 summarizes the learning gains and experiences mentioned by the respondents. The learning gains and experience are mapped with the OECD framework for SE skills (see Table 1).

At the domain level of social and emotional skills, 18 students (49 %) mentioned that they have valuable experience (i.e., learning gains) related to the “open-mindedness” and “task performance” domains. At the skills level, the soft skills of “curiosity”, and “sociability” were cited by 13 students (35%). Next “self-efficacy” 10 students (27%) and then “empathy” 9 students (24%).

Table 1): The distribution of the learning gains and experience mapped with the OECD's framework.

Findings (opinions, lessons learnt) from the New York Times debate on students experiences and gains due to school closure and distance learning	Social and Emotional Skills																
	OPEN-MINDEDNESS (Openness to experience)			TASK PERFORMANCE (Conscientiousness)			ENGAGING WITH OTHERS (Extraversion)			COLLABORATION (agreeableness)		EMOTIONAL REGULATION (emotional stability)			SELF ACHIEVEMENT		
	CURIOSITY	TOLERANCE	CREATIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	SELF-CONTROL	PERSISTENCE	SOCIALITY	ASSERTIVENESS	ENERGY	EMPATHY	TRUST	CO-OPERATION	STRESS RESISTANCE	OPTIMISM	EMOTIONAL CONTROL	ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION	SELF-EFFICACY
Grew in responsibility and independence																	
motivation to go school																	
patience and persistence																	
developing the communication skills, adaptability, and resilience																	
Awareness of other situations and needs																	
technology skills,																	
global awareness and resilience																	
knowledge about real-world issues and their everlasting effects																	
students need to catch up with the curriculum, but instead, the curriculum needs to catch up with us.																	
learned a significant amount of life lessons you can't measure on a standardized test.																	
lot of students matured significantly, grown as a person think differently on many pressing issues such as division in government, racism, police violence, etc.																	
communication or teamwork, Knowledge-sharing																	
more active and interested in current events																	
able to gather information very easily																	
flexibility or adaptability,																	
More informed																	
more organized																	
These real life lessons are valuable because it shows me who we are as a person and how the world is divided																	
Self motivation and goal-setting																	
Dedication, not giving-up																	

Continue -Table 1: The distribution of the learning gains and experience mapped with the OECD's framework.

Findings (opinions, lessons learnt) from the New York Times debate on students experiences and gains due to school closure and distance learning	Social and Emotional Skills																
	OPEN-MINDEDNESS (Openness to experience)			TASK PERFORMANCE (Conscientiousness)			ENGAGING WITH OTHERS (Extraversion)			COLLABORATION (agreeableness)		EMOTIONAL REGULATION (emotional stability)			SELF ACHIEVEMENT		
	CURIOSITY	TOLERANCE	CREATIVITY	RESPONSIBILITY	SELF-CONTROL	PERSISTENCE	SOCIALITY	ASSERTIVENESS	ENERGY	EMPATHY	TRUST	CO-OPERATION	STRESS RESISTANCE	OPTIMISM	EMOTIONAL CONTROL	ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION	SELF-EFFICACY
Time management																	
keep a positive mindset and work attitude in any situation																	
stay positive and happy in multiple situations. This knowledge helps in mental, social, and physical health																	
learned who my close friends actually were																	
realize the importance of seeing my family. Especially my great grandparents																	
be careful with your health and stay safe																	
understand that we are all the same and we should come together																	
realize how important family																	
Know the people who stuck with me through the pandemic																	
I learned that I can still make the best out of the situation I was in realize that you take so many things for granted but you don't realize it until it's gone.																	
learned how to find stuff on my own																	
didn't always need someone to explain something to me																	
needed to stay on top of my learning																	
how to protect myself and others even more																	
how quick something can spread in a short amount of time and affect everyone in their own way																	
Sub-total	13	3	2	7	7	4	13	2	2	9	2	3	3	1	2	2	10
Total	18			18			17			14		6			12		

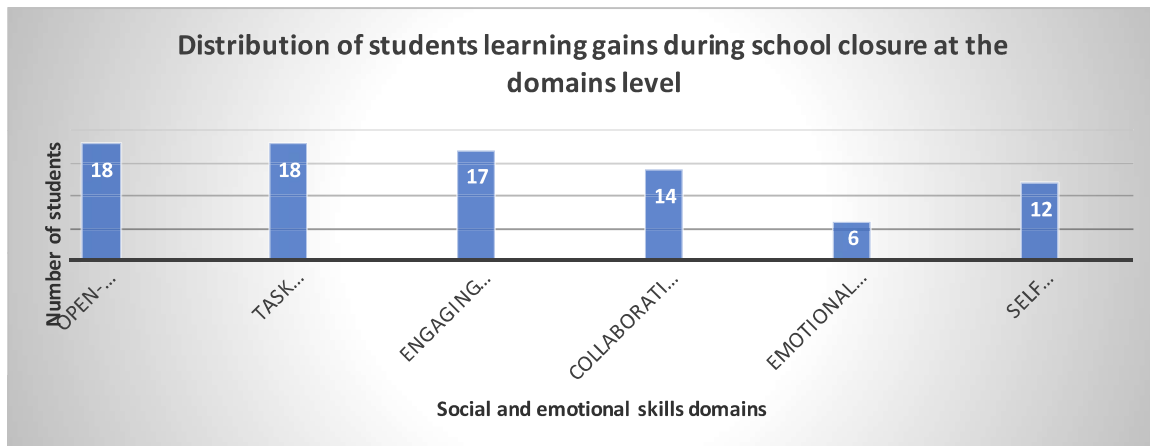


Figure 4: The distribution of the learning gains and experience mapped with the OECD's framework domains.

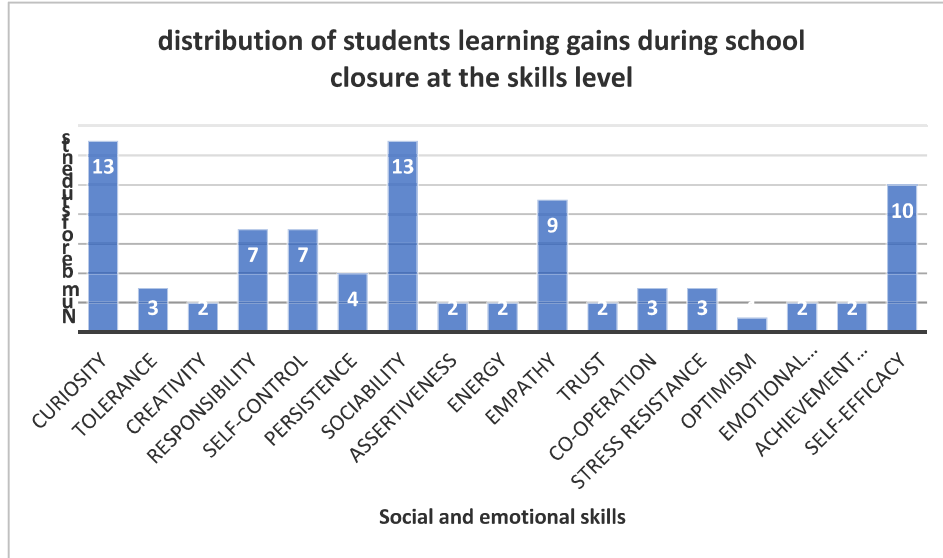


Figure 5: The distribution of the learning gains and experience mapped with the OECD’s framework traits.

### Discussion

From a different perspective, the experiences and lessons learned during school closure and distance learning during COVID-19 can be categorized as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. That is, which represents the main components of any education and learning system and competencies. Hence, gained skills interact with other learning and education aspects (see figure6).

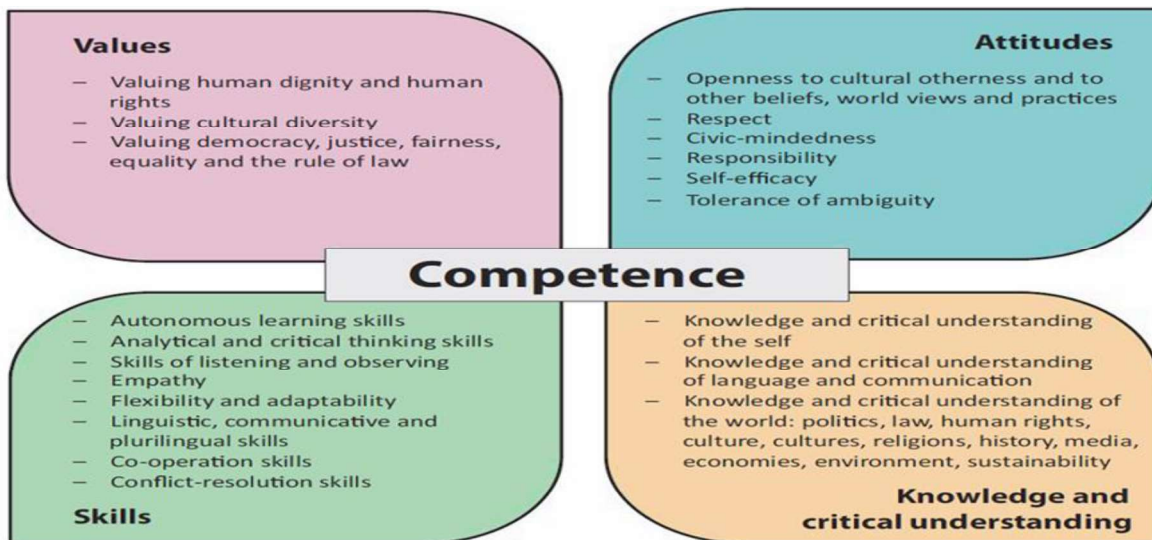


Figure 6: Categories of learning competencies.



### Practical implications

Social and emotional skills are widely incorporated into corporate and organizational values. Hence, the “learning gain” and skills identified are suitable and meet the needs of corporations, workplaces, and employers (see Figure 7).

Company	Corporate Values (keywords)	link
	Inspire, Engage, and Create.	<a href="https://www.sabic.com/en">https://www.sabic.com/en</a>
	High Performance, Teamwork, Commitment, Social Responsibility	<a href="https://careers.rcjy.gov.sa/">https://careers.rcjy.gov.sa/</a>
	Innovation ,Serving the Community, Respect for All	<a href="https://www.alinma.com">https://www.alinma.com</a>

Figure 7: Examples of corporate values related to SE skills.

Moreover, social, and emotional skills constitute 21st-century skills (see Figure 8).

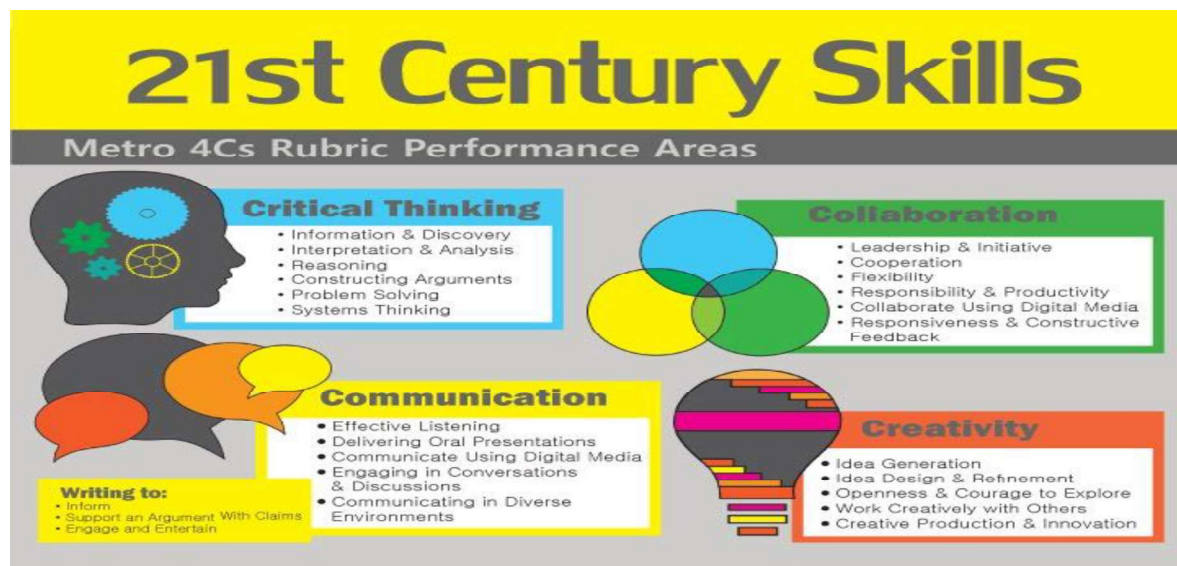


Figure 8: The relationship between SE skills and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.

Understanding the nexus between social-emotional skills, cognitive growth, mental health, and socio-economic outcomes is important for policymakers, educators, parents, and teachers alike.

## Conclusions

Success in education today builds not just cognitive but character fortitude. It is important to recognize the introduction of social and emotional skills, students' well-being, and social relations in the school environment. We need to think in more integrated and creative ways. Live and work together resiliently and productively. Tomorrow's schools need to help students think for themselves and join others, with empathy, in work and citizenship. These are the places where students can learn how to motivate and organize their learning, where teachers stimulate their curiosity and build on and channel their creativity, sociability, and energy. The interconnected development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills starts during early infancy and continues throughout one's lifespan.

## Further research

It becomes increasingly clear that it is important to have reliable, validated measures of students' SE skills. Here we argue that framework and design are additional important considerations for the development and selection of SE skill assessments.

## References

- Bogg, T., & Roberts, B. W. (2004). Conscientiousness and Health-Related Behaviors: A Meta-Analysis of the Leading Behavioral Contributors to Mortality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(6), 887–919. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.6.887> <https://www.edutopia.org/article/lets-start-year-focusing-learning-gains>
- Oleksandr S Chernyshenko, Miloš Kankaraš, Fritz Drasgow , April 2018, Social and emotional skills for student success and wellbeing: Conceptual framework for the OECD study on social and emotional skills, DOI: 10.1787/db1d8e59-en
- Mammadov 2021, The Big Five Personality Traits and Academic Performance: A Meta-Analysis, January 2022 *Journal of Personality* 90(2):222-255, DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12663
- Poropat 2009, A Meta-Analysis of the Five-Factor Model of Personality and Academic Performance, *Psychological Bulletin* 135(2):322-38, DOI: 10.1037/a0014996
- Murray R. BarrickMichael K MountMichael K MountTimothy A. Judge ,2001, Personality and Performance at the Beginning of the New Millennium: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go Next? DOI: 10.1111/1468-2389.00160
- Ethan Z. and Lesick, T. 2021, Big Five Personality Traits and Performance: A Quantitative Synthesis of 50+ Meta-Analyses, *Journal of Personality* 90(1) DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12683 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/learning/what-students-are-saying-about-learning-loss-during-the-pandemic.html>
- OECD (2021), OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills: Technical Report, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<https://www.oecd.org/education/cei/social-emotional-skills-study/sses-technical-report.pdf>

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/lets-start-year-focusing-learning-gains>

OECD (2021), OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills: Technical Report, OECD Publishing, Paris.