



Let's Talk Before We Celebrate a "Progressive Turn": Critical Dialogue on Social and Emotional Learning¹

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Abstract

As social and emotional learning (SEL) picks up pace in the twenty-first century, it is often presented as a universally progressive and even apolitical phenomenon. At the same time, a growing number of politically conservative groups are attacking SEL as a form of "liberal indoctrination." Amidst these layered contexts, there is an urgent need for deep, critical, and culturally humble conversations that recognize SEL as an inevitably political and power-laden phenomenon that must be consciously partnered with a commitment to social justice. In this article, we provide highlights and commentary from an interview podcast with two critical scholars, Clio Stearns and Kathleen Hulton, who shed important light on the sociocultural underpinnings of SEL. These scholars question how far the field of SEL can go in merely improving or reforming current practices, arguing for more radical transformations to the ways in which social and emotional humanity is conceptualized.

Keywords: *social and emotional learning; critical education; equity; podcasting*

Introduction: A Need for Critical Conversations Around SEL

Education in the United States has long sought to address aspects of the "whole child" (Boler, 1999; Osher et al., 2016), but how that endeavor has manifested, what it has been called, and how it has been received by the general public have varied across time and context. In the 2020s, as public schools face increasing budget cuts to art, humanities, and social studies education, as well as diminished time for recess and play (McMullan, 2021; Timon, 2021), a mounting base of empirical research touts the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL). Formally defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2022), at the heart of most SEL lies the assumption that social and emotional aspects of being can be conceptualized as a range of skills or competencies and taught in a codified, formalized manner (Emery, 2016; Hoffman, 2009).

Together, an assemblage of researchers, software and curriculum development companies, investors, international organizations, school administrators, and localized communities uphold the sentiment that SEL is a progressive and evidence-based way to promote positive youth development, maximize academic achievement, and minimize "problem behaviors" (Humphrey, 2013;

1. Acknowledgement: We extend our gratitude to Marc Koch for producing the podcast that inspired this article.

Williamson, 2021). The emergence of SEL learning standards and curricula in the US have rapidly picked up pace in the twenty-first century, and all fifty states have learning goals for SEL at the early childhood level (Philibert, 2016). Simultaneously, SEL has become a target for attacks—usually delivered by those on the political right—describing it as “fluff,” “pseudoscience,” and “liberal indoctrination.” Many of these attacks associate SEL with a range of anti-racist practices collapsed beneath the label of Critical Race Theory (CRT), claiming SEL is a “Trojan Horse for Critical Race Theory” (Alexander, 2021) or a “new variant of the CRT virus” (Harris, 2022). Amidst this layered sociopolitical moment, in which SEL is presented as an apolitical, universally progressive phenomenon by a powerful network of psycho-economic expertise *and* a leftist attempt at radical indoctrination by a smaller but notable group of conservative voices, it is crucial to pose a range of deep and critical questions toward SEL.

The term “SEL” refers to such a wide range of tools and practices that it is difficult to discern what exactly is meant by it. In this article, we use the term primarily in reference to activities that have been brought into formal learning standards and curricular programs, including RULER, PATHS, Second Step, or Responsive Classroom. Common SEL materials within these programs include “feelings dictionaries” and thesauruses, flashcards, games, role-playing, and videos and photographs of people using different strategies to solve conflicts or calm down (Hulton, 2021). A recurrent message throughout these programs is that all emotions are ok to feel, *as long as* the feeler can prolong the time between registering an emotion and acting on it in designated “appropriate” ways (Hulton, 2021). When thinking critically about SEL, the question emerges of whether SEL simply needs to expand on what counts as “appropriate” ways of being, or whether a more radical reconfiguration of “SEL” itself is necessary.

A considerable amount of work focuses on ways to improve SEL; for instance, by developing renditions that are more culturally-responsive, community-led, and implemented with fidelity (Garner et al., 2014; Osher et al. 2016; Slaten et al., 2015). Some advocate for SEL that is explicitly oriented toward social justice (Simmons, 2019), using descriptors such as Transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019), SEL+ (El Sabbagh, 2021), or Social-Emotional Learning for Social-Emotional Justice (Higheagle Strong & McMMain, 2020). Seldom, however, do researchers go so far as to depart from the labeled phenomenon of SEL itself or suggest dismantling its hegemony entirely (see Camangian & Cariaga, 2019; Hulton, 2021; and Stearns, 2019, for exceptions). There remains a pressing need for research and conversations that recognize SEL as a power-laden and always-political attempt not only to support student wellbeing or improve the productivity in a classroom (and nation) but also to foster a particular definition of personhood.

When educators are tasked with teaching students how to become self-aware, behave appropriately in groups, make responsible decisions, or regulate their inner experiences, what social norms and assumptions are at play? Simmons (2017, 2019) and Kaler-Jones (2020) draw awareness to how SEL can perpetuate deficit narratives of students of color when it is presented as a remediation to “correct” their social and emotional identities. Who gets to say what is defined—and emotionally experienced—as good, appropriate, right, or desirable at a social and emotional level of being? Does all learning necessarily come from explicit teaching? How do power dynamics across race, gender, class, ability, and other facets of identity operate with and through SEL? In this conceptual paper (stemming from a 50-minute podcast), we relay highlights from an interview conversation with two researcher-educators, Dr. Clio Stearns and Dr. Kathleen Hulton, whose work in SEL explores questions such as these.

The two of us received our graduate degrees from the same college of education: while Emma's research interests include SEL and teacher education, Brandon pursues arts-based methodologies and podcasting as public pedagogy. We blended these interests by co-hosting a podcast interview with Dr. Stearns and Dr. Hulton, working against the grain of academia that privileges linear, succinct, written knowledge over that which is spoken, cyclical, messy, and even tangential (Honan et al., 2018; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). As two white scholars interviewing two other white scholars about SEL and its relationship to social (in)justice, we recognize that many elements of our discussion are not novel. In our critique of saviorist discourses around SEL, we also work against a meta kind of saviorism that seeks to save the field of SEL from being saviorist. Our aim is to interject questions that are not always asked in scholarly conversations, but to do so in a way that invites learning from the lived experiences of students and educators—particularly those of color—who have long grappled with such issues outside the awareness of higher education.

“Methodology”

The decision to include the heading of Methodology in an academic article carries the immediate assumption that the given article is a research study. This paper, which provides highlights and discussion from an oral interview, faces a bit of an identity crisis. Is this project conceptual? Is it empirical? Who is a co-author, who is a researcher, who is a participant? The term “research” unleashes with it a flood of ethical quandaries and expectations of rigor...why might other forms of knowledge production be exempt from the same kinds of rules or assumptions? Hegemony is easier to identify when it is breached than when it is followed, and the usual procedures of research may not come into question until a situation becomes ambiguous and genre-defying.

As we draft this article, selecting quotes to include from the interview transcription and storying them into a written narrative, how different is this process than qualitative analysis for formal studies? If I (Emma) am interviewing a second-grade teacher for a research project, I must take care to anonymize the participant and adhere to the protocols established by my university's institutional review board. If I am interviewing two established scholars in the fields of sociology and education, however, I may *broadcast* their identities and establish “consent” through relational cues and email decorum, no IRB approval required. In the results section of a qualitative research article, I typically interweave direct quotations from participants with theoretical and empirical evidence from other sources, remembering never to assume that an in-vivo quote will speak for itself. In a paper like this, which aims to share two scholars' voices and knowledge with a broader community, we do not intend to “analyze” their quotes so much as present them (although we are, of course, implicitly and unquestionably analyzing, synthesizing, and emotionally reacting to their words as we read, cut, paste, and type).

Our point in providing transparency about this article's playfully named identity crisis is to shine a light on the precarious, subjective, and power-laden line that separates “research” from “other forms of knowledge,” a “formal” study from an “informal” one, and a “recruited participant” from an “invited guest.” We choose to use the term Methodology in this section to invite the question of whether an informal conversation may or may not want to gain access to the level of legitimacy afforded by research, or perhaps to emphasize that while ethical and political relativism can become undeniably and inexcusably dangerous (e.g., treating white supremacist dialogue as acceptable, grounded in positivistic truth, or exempt from judgment), there is also a danger in drawing heavily guarded boundaries around what is conceived of as authentic or “scientific”

knowledge in and beyond educational communities. While further contemplation of these dynamics spans beyond the scope of this paper, they are worth the mention—if nothing else, as food for thought in the spirit of the free-flowing conversation-as-knowledge for which our podcasting advocates.²

Podcasting as Dialogic Production of Knowledge and Relationship

We utilize podcasting as a “part academic part creative assemblage” (Honan et al., 2018, p. 3) and as an interdisciplinary bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), drawing from the field of Education Sounds Studies (Gershon, 2017) in recognizing the world as something that is created—not merely reflected—by spoken words. Such an idea is not new but is rather a recognition of many Indigenous ways of learning since time immemorial (Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 1994). We draw direct inspiration from the Indigenous research method, The Dialogic Spiral (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), which describes the intimate spiral moving between speakers/listeners (*between space*), moving upwards and outwards to symbolize a co-generation of knowledge and relationships, “expanding prior understandings of listening and speaking” (San Pedro, 2013, pp. 117-118). Critical Podcast Methodology (Edwards-Schuth, 2023) connects spoken-word, the medium of podcasts, and the method of Dialogic Spirals to “nurture a dialogical approach amongst co-hosts engaged in the co-creation of knowledge and narrative, through non-hierarchical inquiry and sometimes debate” (p. 94). Recognizing that conflict and disagreement are also inherent in dialogue, we embrace the reality of dissensus where speakers may agree on the *conditions of possibility* for a conversation yet still leave room for unclear answers, nuance, and differences of opinion (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018).

We strategically chose podcasts as our medium because of their wide popularity and deep-seated commitment to public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000; Jaramillo, 2010), making critical research and dialogue more publicly accessible instead of behind traditional academic paywalls. Podcasts are a way in which we can leverage our academic positions and privileges, and/also we aim to model scholar-activism for *democratization* (Amin, 2001), i.e., practicing and pushing ever-changing democratic practices into all domains of life. When it comes to SEL, a phenomenon that contains so many layers of hegemony alongside potential transformation, podcasting offers a venue for organic, collaborative, multi-sensory dialogue. Even within the genre and set-up of an interview (with pre-prepared questions and a process of turn-taking with providing answers), bringing multiple voices together in real-time can foster a sense of intimacy and responsiveness that may not otherwise be possible. For example, while a tangential stream of thought can be deleted or rearranged in the draft of a written article, its presence in the middle of a spoken conversation is tangible and irremovable, perhaps being “off topic” but opening space for an example, story, or connection to affectively impress upon those who bear witness.

An Interview with Clio Stearns and Kathleen. Hulton

I (Emma) initially discovered Clio Stearns during a literature search on SEL for the early stages of my dissertation. In her article, “Let Them Get Mad: Using the Psychoanalytic Frame to Rethink SEL and Trauma Informed Practice” (2020), Stearns presents vignettes from her ethnographic work in a third-grade classroom that did *not* currently include a codified version of SEL.

2. The Podcast can be accessed here: 

I was struck by Stearns' unique angle of analysis, questioning what we may read as good or bad in a classroom and noticing where moments of connection, agency, and validation can emerge even (and perhaps especially) in the midst of "unregulated" emotional experience. In my dissertation (2022), I created a book club-esque discourse community of six elementary educators and myself, and we read from a variety of materials on SEL including Stearns' 2019 publication, *Critiquing Social and Emotional Learning: Psychodynamic and Cultural Perspectives*.

In the summer of 2022, while I analyzed qualitative artifacts from the discourse community and completed a full written draft of my dissertation, I also partook in a virtual workshop series focused on the intersections of art, ecology, and health. In this space of social and emotional learning that felt no need to assume such a label, I connected with a climate justice educator and we shared about our respective research interests. Upon hearing about my critical work on SEL, my new friend eagerly directed me toward the work of *her* good friend, Dr. Kathleen Hulton. Subsequently, I downloaded Dr. Hulton's (2021) dissertation, "Creating the Emotionally Competent Child: The Education of Feelings in American Public Schools," and was immediately taken in by the depth and honesty of Hulton's historical and current analysis of SEL. Dr. Hulton points to SEL's reliance on presenting itself as a response to social crisis, with a model of "cure" focused on the level of the individual. SEL promotes a self-discipline that is not just about calmness and rule-following but about fostering a responsible, self-knowing, emotionally "skilled" kind of personhood.

"I wish Hulton and Stearns could have a conversation," I mused while I read. And then, shortly thereafter, "why *couldn't* they?" It was then that I extended my invitation for them to partake in an informal conversation, followed by the podcast co-hosted with Brandon. In the subsequent sections of this paper, we provide directly-quoted highlights and commentary from five central questions posed to Dr. Stearns and Dr. Hulton in the podcast, ending with a brief discussion to summarize important takeaways and introduce possible implications for future conversation. Although the ordering of the interview questions is the same in the podcast conversation and the written sections below, the presentation of the speakers' answers does not necessarily follow the original chronology in which they occurred. Importantly, we do not consider this written article and the audio-recorded podcast to be substitutes for one another—we suggest that interested readers/listeners engage with both, recognizing each modality for what it uniquely offers. We began the conversation quite broadly, asking our guests to describe how they first became interested in researching SEL.

What Led You to Research SEL?

Dr. Hulton (Kathleen) shared that her intrigue in SEL was the result of a "combining of two worlds." First, Kathleen had "always been really interested sociologically in emotion," specifically referencing Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work on emotion rules and the capitalistic practice of "controlling people's emotions for the service of profit." Second, Kathleen's sociological interest in emotion intensified as she watched her own children begin to learn about their feelings in school: "I saw this sort of change, I didn't even know it was called social and emotional learning at the time." She became curious about the disconnect in sociology, wherein sociologists may say, "Oh, it's a *bad* thing that workplaces want to control people's emotions, but then we see SEL as this sort of unequivocally good thing, and not having that critical lens there at all."

Dr. Stearns (Clio) then described her own path to SEL, which emerged through her experiences teaching fourth and fifth grade in New York City. "I got sent to a training," she said, "a

Responsive Classroom training...I just remember sitting there through a week of training over the summer and listening to some of the scripted recommendations that they were making. I felt really offended as a teacher, and affronted by the ways my interactions with children were...the scripts that were being suggested.” Although Clio now describes Responsive Classroom as a “relatively low-key” form of SEL intervention, she said that training drove her back to graduate school with a new alertness toward “what was happening, SEL-wise.”

Why is SEL So Appealing to So Many People?

Because Clio and Kathleen have both written in depth about the eclectic origins of SEL, we were interested in their take on why SEL has taken off in popularity since its inception in the 1990s. “What do you think has contributed to this massive surge of SEL in the twenty-first century? What is it that makes SEL so appealing to so many people?” Clio answered first this time:

I actually don’t think there’s been a surge in SEL so much as a surge in *calling it* SEL. Education in the United States for a long time has done other things besides what we call academics...to me, this SEL phase is just one more stage in the evolution of that strand of thinking.

Kathleen indicated her agreement with this declaration, while complicating it a bit:

I also agree with the idea that SEL has grown out of and shares a lot with earlier twentieth century interventions into the “whole child” in different ways. People have been interested in other parts of children and developing children since public education was invented in this country. So there is that. Although I do think it’s that *and* the interest has become more intense...I think SEL has been there, but there also *has* been a surge. I think it's both.

Clio went on to say that “a big part of [SEL’s popularity] is an ongoing and increasing concern with children’s behavior, which partly has to do with an uptick in academic standardization.”

When we ask more of kids, we’re stressing them out. And we’re asking a lot more of them academically a lot younger. Often, children have no recourse but to communicate via their behavior, and then that in turn stresses teachers out, and teachers start looking for ways to manage behavior. But it's not very kosher to say, “We just want to get kids to behave.” So instead, we dupe ourselves, and we—I mean, I’m guilty of this as well. We dupe ourselves into thinking we're helping them emotionally, when what we're really doing is—I think SEL is just really a way of teaching compliance without calling it that.

Again, Kathleen both echoed and added to this statement, discussing how the larger context behind “student compliance” has shifted along with what is recognized as appropriate or inappropriate means of discipline:

As the kinds of tools that are available to adults for managing children's behaviors have changed, we need something at the end of the day to make children conform to these larger

things that we're asking of them. I don't agree [certain forms of discipline] *should* be allowed, but I think it's a combination of those things plus one more thing. Our ideas of what children are and what they should be capable of have also changed.

In their written works, Clio and Kathleen expand on the argument that SEL is a way to teach compliance. For instance, Kathleen (2021) provides the example of a Second Step end-of-the-year assessment that asks Kindergarteners to pretend they are frustrated with a difficult puzzle and need to calm down. Their multiple-choice options are: a) Hit something, b) Belly breathe, and c) Yell, with photographs of each choice. The answer key shows that b) Belly breathe, is the only acceptable answer (Committee for Children, 2011, p. 91). Without suggesting that yelling and hitting are perfectly fine in any context, what assumptions about personhood are made in this multiple-choice question? How much of the goal is to engage with one's social and emotional self, and how much is the goal to foster compliance within institutional structures?

Although neither Clio nor Kathleen chose to discuss the surface-level appeal of SEL and its feel-good connotations in public discourse (e.g., SEL as a long-awaited embrace of the emotions that have allegedly been denied in public schooling), they do discuss this idea in their respective works, including how SEL's public popularity has depended on liaisons (e.g., Daniel Goleman, 1995) between the "scientific" research community and public-facing "pop psychology." Stearns and Hulton unpack not only how SEL is seen as a palatable way to promote student compliance with increasing academic demands but also a response to broader social crises.

Where Do You Situate Your Own Critique?

Amidst the many conversations currently unfolding around SEL (from calling it a Trojan Horse for Critical Race Theory to presenting it as an apolitical move of progress), a knee-jerk reaction is often to ask people which "side they are on," as if the issue can be divided into a debate of pro-SEL or anti-SEL. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of layers—not sides—to dialogue around SEL, we asked Clio and Kathleen, "Where do you situate yourselves in that constellation of critique?" Kathleen answered that "this question, on one hand, is very hard for me to answer. But on the other hand, the sort of simple answer is that I think it's a very comfortable and usual position for me to find myself outside of some kind of debate. No matter what the debate is about, I think I'm really used to finding myself not on either side but just not well captured by the sides." She went on:

In terms of the right's critique of it as indoctrination...like a sneaky vehicle for whatever the boogie man of the time may be, and right now it's Critical Race Theory, so SEL must be some kind of way to kind of hide that in some way...I don't think that is true, and yet there are elements of truth in the critique, I think. "SEL is just this basically neutral, apolitical, basic way of being a good person we can all agree on," I don't agree with that either. ...Is SEL just some sort of innocent, progressive thing to be celebrated? No, I don't believe it is. Is it some kind of sinister way to hide over some hidden agenda that the left agrees on? No, it isn't...I don't find either of those ways of thinking about SEL particularly true or helpful. Neither of them well capture either the promises and pleasures of SEL or the dangers of it.

“I agree,” said Clio. “Kathleen, I definitely understand what you’re saying and agree with what you’ve said.”

Anything that we do in schools is going to be inherently political because schools are a political phenomenon. They've never not been. And if anything, the push, the drive to see them as anything other than that is one of the most frightening re-writings of American educational history that I've ever seen. I think the word “indoctrination” is a really complicated word, because nobody can fully define the difference between indoctrination and education in a generally agreed upon way. So I do sometimes think that there are ways of doing SEL that can be frightening and destructive in a way that *does* feel very much like a problematic iteration of indoctrination to me...If we're going to celebrate SEL as a progressive turn in education, then we have to look *really* closely at what it is. And I mean, I've spent a lot of time studying a range of the most popular SEL curricula, seeing what happens in schools where those curricula are used, and I've just never seen it do anything that I would call progressive at all. I've never seen it do anything other than teach kids that their ways of being in the world inherently are a little bit flawed. And so I can't really see that as a progressive turn.

As Clio spoke these last sentences through our Zoom meeting, I (Author 1) sat at my computer and pictured all the students I have witnessed during my years volunteering in elementary schools being reminded to take deep belly breaths, reconfigure their sprawling bodies into a tidy “criss-cross applesauce,” or use an “I statement” instead of angrily accusing a classmate of hurting their feelings at recess. Often, *I* have been the one to deliver these “reminders.” SEL is often but not always the vehicle for such practices, as some SEL materials simply ask students to reflect on, not change, how they are feeling or what they are doing. Even asking students to get better at noticing their emotions, however, can suggest that SEL is something they will “learn” and become better at as they develop. Vassallo (2017) critiques the neoliberal assumption embedded in much of developmental psychology—and SEL—that linear betterment is the most sought-after mode of change. How might educators value the social and emotional ways of being that children already come into the world with, disrupting the constant discourse of “working on oneself” (Vassallo, 2017)? What metaphors of change and health might exist beyond the limited choices of upward progress, downward decline, or unchanging stagnation?

While neither I, Clio, nor Kathleen are a proponent of throwing up our hands to say “anything goes!” in a classroom, there remains such a powerful discourse of “correction” in so many SEL curricula and everyday practices. “I’ve never seen it do anything other than teach kids that their ways of being in the world inherently are a little bit flawed”... The simple candor of these words struck me with a wave of sadness that left me swaying with validation, my body releasing a breath I didn’t know I had been holding.

What Are Your Primary Concerns with SEL?

Clio’s and Kathleen’s concerns with SEL intertwined throughout all the interview questions, but we asked the following question to ensure we touched on it explicitly: “What do you wish people would know more about, think more about, or even feel more about in particular [regarding SEL]?” For the sake of providing a more easily-identifiable list of takeaways, we present their responses beneath a few major themes.

What Are We Not Doing When We Do SEL?

At several points in our conversation, Clio spoke to the reality that time for one thing means time away from another.

I'm in probably a dozen elementary schools a week, and none of them has social studies in the curriculum at all. Science a little bit. But basically the days are math, reading, and SEL. ...By and large—and this is less true in middle and high school—but by and large, early childhood and elementary school settings have certainly prioritized SEL, for example, over history education. I think that's like an indisputable comment. Or over any sort of political or democratic education or involvement...Kids are in school for six and a half hours, and if we're spending half an hour of that, every single day, with these kinds of skills and techniques, that's half an hour that we're really not doing something else. And as we've seen more programmatic interventions in education across the board, we've seen the decrease not only in science and social studies but in playtime over the course of the school day.

What sorts of social and emotional learning may happen outside of codified curricula, distinct content areas, and conscious recognition? Colonized education systems often assume a natural link between “teaching” and “learning,” with the latter contingent on the former, but *does* all learning come from explicit teaching (Biesta, 2014)? As so many Indigenous understandings of education would remind us (Bang & Medin, 2010; Cajete, 1994), the answer is often “no.”

What Does SEL Present as the Problem, and Who is Expected to Solve It?

Both Clio and Kathleen emphasized that SEL remains rooted in white, middle-class, ableist norms and assumptions that may recognize social issues but place the onus of control onto the shoulders of the individual. “Probably my biggest [concern about SEL],” said Clio, “is that I think by and large, it puts the locus of control over reactions to circumstance in the hands and minds of individual children, rather than addressing underlying social injustices, in a way that's really flawed and destructive.” She went on to share a heartrending story from her ethnographic work, when a first-grade student raised his hand during an SEL lesson to respond to the prompt about a “time he had been sad.” The boy shared that he was sad the previous night because he was shivering and cold, but his blanket had holes in it and his home had no heating. The teacher responded by circling back to the learning objectives of the lesson, which included taking deep belly breaths when we get sad. Clio reflected on this story, explaining that she saw a great deal of empathy in this particular teacher but also a great deal of pressure to adhere to the scripted curriculum:

There is something extreme about that example. But I saw stories like that again and again, where these programs are telling kids that things we can think of as radical, *painful* social injustices that we're committing against children in this country all the time...Now, not only do they have to live within that, but *they're* the one—it's *their* fault that they're not feeling great about it.

Camangian and Cariaga (2021) echo this concern, writing that “any framework that focuses more on changing people’s maladaptive social and emotional orientation to oppression —rather than

aiming towards transforming oppressive social conditions itself —is hegemonic because it anesthetizes the political will of a people” (p. 3). Where, in the increasing absence of social studies and history education, is that political will being nurtured? “I absolutely agree with what Clio was saying,” said Kathleen.

There [is just] this huge disconnect for many children, in terms of what their actual emotional reality is and then the somewhat canned responses [from teachers and curricula]. What is actually safe and okay to talk about at school? I also have spent a lot of time with these curricula. And so many of the examples are so, like, the examples of middle-class white kids.

Again, Camangian and Cariaga speak to this issue, arguing that SEL often prevents students of color “from fully sharing their experience of social alienation and systemic harm or even their culturally informed ideas of happiness and wellness” (p. 16). Kathleen’s comment also prompted me (Emma) to recall an example from my own dissertation study: one of the teachers was discussing how many children in her district have incarcerated family members, which also speaks to the systemic racism and classism entangled with the criminal injustice system of the United States. “I haven’t seen that come up in a Second Step [SEL curriculum] lesson,” said another teacher with a tone of dark humor. She was right. Stolen pencils, spilled milk, jealousy between friends at recess...without taking away from the emotional legitimacy of such moments, what kinds of scenarios are *not* being discussed in the context of children’s social and emotional experiences?

How Does SEL Expect Children (and Teachers) to Solve, Learn, and Be?

Lastly, Kathleen shared her concern about how simplistic many SEL curricula can be, presenting teacher and students with a universal set of “tools” through which to achieve social and emotional competence:

It assumes a sort of sameness. Human interaction is one of the most complicated things in the world! It has so much shaping by cultural difference, and age, and things are also changing so rapidly. I think about...how we teach math, and historically how the teaching of math has changed. I know enough to know that math instruction no longer assumes that there's one rote way of doing math. So even in math, we acknowledge that there's this diversity, and we give kids different tools and are like, “What kinds of tools work best with your brain to figure out this problem?” And it's just like there's this assumption that even *math* is messy in terms of how people do it. I feel like social and emotional learning of today is like a math of forty years ago, where it’s just like, “We’re gonna teach everybody the same way of how to deal with your feelings, how to deal with other people, and here's this script. Go ahead, go off with your script and you'll be fine.” Whereas we know that social life is a lot messier than that.

It is important to acknowledge that many SEL scholars, educators, and practitioners have increasingly expressed a need for SEL that is more culturally-sustaining, community-driven, and geared toward social justice (El-Sabbagh, 2021; Jagers et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2016). Proponents of

SEL may read the concerns voiced by Clio and Kathleen and agree with many premises but conclude that what we need is *better* SEL, not *no* SEL. We closed the podcast interview with the (anything-but) straightforward question of “Do you think SEL is a practice worth embracing?”

Do You Think SEL is a Practice Worth Embracing?

“Thinking of SEL’s dangers and its potential for harm or just not being helpful, or its potential for being good and helpful,” we asked Kathleen and Clio, “how do we weigh those? Can we even classify SEL as good or bad? What should we be doing with SEL? *Should* we be doing it? Should we completely shut it down? Should we advocate for it contextually?” In Kathleen’s closing comments, she explained that while she is extremely concerned with SEL’s current manifestations and underlying assumptions, she still sees it as an important illumination of people’s desire to recognize the relational and emotional pieces of ourselves—and to address the ongoing trauma and crisis experienced by so many in a world ravaged by ecological destruction, pandemic illness, and social atrocities.

I have a lot of empathy for people who really love SEL. I want to critique these darker sides of it, but at the same time I don’t necessarily think it needs to be trashed...I want to know more about why people want it so badly, the people who want it so badly, and I want to use it as a sort of lens into the things that we’re missing or that we need. I think it’s not a great answer to those things that are missing, but it still shines a light on what a lot of people are missing about childhood, about schools right now. What people seem to be saying they want is more connection and more time to relate to children and for children to relate to one another, and they want ways to deal with the huge feelings that are coming into classrooms.

Kathleen went on to share a story about her own child and the heavy weight that so many youth are carrying. Just as it is important not to present children as one-dimensionally traumatized, unwell, or in crisis, it is *also* important not to romanticize them as happy-go-lucky or endlessly resilient:

Clio, when you were telling the story about the boy who had no heat, I actually just thought of this interaction I had with my own kid this weekend. She was getting ready to go to Homecoming, she’s fifteen. We were downtown and she had just gotten a manicure, and she was just delighting in her manicure and thinking about the homecoming dance, and it was this perfect fall day, she was just like, out of nowhere, “Mama, isn’t it so sad the world is gonna end soon?” You know, children are grappling with these huge realities. Even children who are relatively privileged and getting ready for Homecoming—I think they have so much weighing on them, and I think teachers and parents and—we need some tools to help them hold together a lot of really complex feelings...I don’t believe that this desire for SEL should be squashed or thrown in the trash. At the same time, so many of the things we’ve talked about as its limitations: I think there’s a level of dehumanization, there’s a level of it being more simplistic than human interaction actually is, there’s a level of kind of lying to kids and telling them we’re giving them a tool that is maybe more universal and powerful than it actually is. I don’t know. I like a lot of the tools, but I wish they could be

presented with more context, with more real talk about inequality and some of the things that might make those tools more or less useful to different people at different times.

“I’m sympathetic to what you’re saying, Kathleen, and also I feel generally more negative about SEL as a practice,” replied Clio:

I *definitely* would never say schools and teachers shouldn't reckon with the emotional lives of children or teachers. I just really think SEL is a misguided way of doing it, and I'd rather see it go away. But I don't think that's gonna happen, you know, because it's really trendy and has gained even more attraction as such since the beginning of the pandemic. So I guess I do feel like we need to find ways to work within it. But I find that it basically drives a bigger wedge between children and teachers. It's like one more curriculum to get through. I think it's true that this sort of desperation for relationality and emotional integrity in the classroom is very much there, and yet...there's a whole host of problems around that. For example, in teacher licensing, the drive is increasingly towards content knowledge and increasingly less towards anything around child development or emotional life...so there's this hegemony of content. And then SEL gets fit in as one of the content areas. I guess I think it's primarily destructive. I mean, I think there are a lot of other ways that schools could be spending that twenty-five minutes.

Clio went on to consider what would happen if “SEL time” were replaced with asking teachers to “do a little bit more internal work in thinking about how *they* want to talk about feelings—their own feelings and kids’ feelings.”

To me, that’s almost definitely going to be better than having something predetermined, a predetermined set of language and skills. I mean, I personally am very disinclined to think of anything around social and emotional life in terms of “skills.” I find it problematic that—I mean, it’s language from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, it’s language from neuroscience to a certain extent, it’s language from the way that learning sciences in general have kind of colonized education. I do think it’s dehumanizing. I think it’s dehumanizing to teachers as well as to children.

Clio then shared another example from her classroom observations: In this story, a boy was sent away from the group because he was being disruptive, and he sat alone at a desk angrily stomping his feet. A girl in the class quietly and stealthily scooted over to the floor beneath his chair and gifted him a tiny piece of paper, folded up many times. Together, they unfolded the paper and counted the squares (in ones and twos), then refolded and unfolded, co-regulating their bodies outside of the teacher’s recognition. “And there's just no space for the teacher to even look at that and notice,” said Clio.

The teacher doesn't even have a minute to *think* about that, because she is just reading from the playbook, so I guess it's all just a long-winded way of saying I would rather see it go away entirely, and to kind of go back to the drawing board and think about what are we doing with feelings when they come into schools? But I don't actually see that happening. So I think we do have to figure out ways to work within it.

In my (Emma's) critical work on SEL, I come up against this tension time and time again: as Kathleen discussed, there is a *reason* people are so readily incorporating SEL into the zeitgeist, and yet that reason may be simultaneously bound to a desire for social and emotional wholeness *and* a capitalistic urge to marketize, measure, and manage the ways in which human beings experience their social and emotional worlds (Apple, 2004; Williamson, 2021). What happens when social and emotional awareness is brought into a neoliberal understanding of education as the acquisition of "tools" and "skills" that can be classified and compared for competitive aims that ultimately serve a white, colonial, oligarchical, and heteropatriarchal status quo? As I (Emma) said in my own closing comments, "I think just sitting with these questions and grappling with the reality of it, and the imaginaries of what [social and emotional learning] *could* be and what *else* could be happening, all of that is something I hope we can all be considering at this moment."

Conclusion

Recently, I (Emma) presented a conference paper in a session entitled, "Parents' and Teachers' Loving Critiques of SEL." As I said at the end of my presentation, I am not sure how well my work fits into that title. Like many scholars, I examine SEL through a critical lens, and I *would* say my critique comes from a place of love. That love is for children, for teachers, for families and communities. I have a fierce love for the relational and emotional parts of ourselves that cannot be neatly or formulaically wrangled into predetermined lessons and learning objectives. I also have a certain kind of love for pragmatism in the sense of valuing and building from that which feels right, authentic, or even fleetingly beneficial, and I believe many people (teachers and children alike) *have* experienced those kinds of feelings from particular renditions of SEL—including those that address social injustices and are not confined into pre-scripted lesson blocks. All that love, however, is not synonymous with love for SEL itself. By saying we critique something "lovingly," we maintain the premise that the thing itself is untouchable, no matter how rigorous the debate may be beneath it. If SEL "works," for what and for whom does it work...what does that work *do*? I often return to this quote from Noam Chomsky (1998):

The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum—even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate. (p. 43)

Where are the limits to the range of the debate around SEL? How might we simultaneously recognize the reality of those limits and imagine beyond them (e.g., a reality in which the paradigm of SEL transitions into localized community-building, increased playtime, revamped social studies education, and an overarching commitment to dismantle capitalistic and colonial empires), while also recognizing how we might "work within" a phenomenon that is unlikely to soon disappear? Audré Lorde (1984) states that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." SEL is in some ways a tool of the master, through its entanglements with colonial models of personhood (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021), white-supremacist manifestations (Simmons, 2019), and political conglomerates seeking to utilize social and emotional data for economic ends (Williamson, 2021). A question we cannot help but ask, however, is whether SEL could simultaneously become a repurposed strategy of disruption, a transformative phenomenon that *could* be taken up in radical

ways within the classroom, an assemblage of practices with undeniable momentum behind them that could be redirected in new/revitalized ways.

Kathleen Hulton and Clio Stearns both illuminate and probe these sometimes-invisible limits on the debate around SEL, and their voices remind us not to lose sight of macro-level concerns amidst trendy, glossy representations of the micro (e.g., SEL tools and programs). At the same time, they remind us not to lose sight of the *micro*, whether it is a moment of unscripted solidarity between children or an excitedly critical lesson still labeled as “SEL,” that continue to materialize beneath all the problems of the macro. Talking is not enough, but it is something...through collective conversation, both orally and in written form, perhaps we might move closer to the kinds of re-thinking, re-storying, and re-materializing that are necessary for social and emotional humanity at this moment.

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