

Social and emotional learning and studies on fostering synergistic development: Editorial comment

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is currently a measure of states' accountability included in the Every Student Succeeds Act, under indicators of "school quality and student success", allowing the states to expand the understanding of student success to also include social and emotional development (Melnick *et al.*, 2017, p. V). SEL competencies refer to: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2019).

This Supplemental Special Issue of the *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching and Learning (JRIT&L)* continues the goal of the previous special edition on SEL, namely, to illustrate the tableau of SEL applications in communities, districts, schools, classrooms and homes. The content of this issue focuses on SEL's contribution to a synergistic development from early childhood to adulthood. Synergistic development refers to the evolution of abilities and skills, which, when working together, can achieve more than the sum of their separate outputs.

According to Kurt Lewin, the human behaviour is a product of person-environment interaction in the form of $B = f(P, E)$, where B is Behaviour, f stands for function of, P is Person, and E is Environment (Lewin, 1936). This formula was adopted by Urie Brofenfrenner, when he emphasised the dynamics between the individual and his surroundings, and described the human being as a system functioning within a macrosystem (1979); and, also, by Gregory Bateson, when he developed his ecological framework based on "unit of survival is *organism plus environment*" (Bateson, 1987, p. 491). If we view the child as a complex adaptive entity (Lansing, 2003), we can contemplate him/her as an interdependent system in which all psychological processes, viewed as subsystems, merge to contribute to the human expression. If we consider the human being as an open nonlinear (self-organising) system (Klochko, 2008; Klochko and Galazhinsky, 2009), we would conclude that humans are highly adaptable and often predictable based on individual history and ecological circumstances. It is these environmental factors that this journal issue is focusing on: How can education providers shape the education environment that fosters SEL? These environmental factors can be pre-arranged to foster SEL competencies in the developing human beings so they can develop into a healthy, harmonious and whole person (synergistically).

SEL's impact on a student's academics, behaviours, attitudes and other abilities is "long-term and global" (CASEL, 2019). In addition, SEL ubiquitously promotes the general development of all students, regardless on their particular needs (Zins and Elias, 2007). To present, there are several published literature reviews and reports that attest to the positive and synergistic potential impact of SEL abilities to improve people's lives, rendering SEL as a pivotal (key) skill that unlocks the emergence and mastery of other skills in the above-mentioned domains. For example, analysing 213 school-based SEL programs, Durlak *et al.* concluded that students who underwent an SEL curriculum displayed "significantly



improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement” (2011, p. 405). In 2015, the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution put forth a report that stated that an improvement of education “in ways that will better help poor children avail themselves of opportunities for self-advancement” also includes training in “social-emotional and character development” (AEI/Brookings, 2015, p. 5). In the same year, a study using national data showed positive correlations between Kindergarten measured social-emotional skills and crucial adult outcomes across education, employment, criminal activity, substance use and overall mental health (Jones *et al.*, 2015). Following a literature review of the benefits of implementing SEL in afterschool programs by Durlak *et al.*, (2010), Ashley Wallace and Jennifer Palmer (2018) considered ulterior literature and found that most effective programs develop social and emotional skills intentionally and explicitly, leading to developing meaningful relationships between staff and youth, which could later evolve into career readiness skills. As a final illustration of the size of the impact SEL has on developing children, when looking at the return to investment of SEL, researchers from the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (2015) from Columbia University found that the average cost-benefit ratio is approximately 11 to 1 among the six evidence-based SEL interventions, meaning that for every \$1 invested in SEL training, there is a return of \$11.

Initially, the majority of research on SEL has focussed on benefits for students, but nascent research supports that SEL is also associated with teacher outcomes. For example, teachers’ SEL practices are negatively associated with their burnout and positively associated with their efficacy (Ransford *et al.*, 2009); teachers’ SEL beliefs are positively associated with their commitment to the profession (Collie *et al.*, 2011); their comfort in implementing SEL was associated with stress related to student behaviour, and positively associated with teaching efficacy and job satisfaction (Collie *et al.*, 2012); their SEL skills are negatively associated with burnout and positively associated with job satisfaction (Brackett *et al.*, 2010).

The studies featured in this issue analyse education variables from early childhood to tertiary education. The first commentary comes out of the expertise gathered at the Take5! Institute, and suggests that integration, by connecting parts to make a functional whole, is a key to build self-regulation assets to surmount adversity and trauma. The second commentary focuses on how counsellors can assist teachers understand and implement SEL in their classrooms. The next commentary signals the importance of preparing pre-service and in-service teachers with SEL tools to implement in their future classrooms. Further, the last commentary advocates for SEL training in higher education.

The first article in this special edition adopts a Vygotskian lens to look at empathy and overall SEL development via traditional and virtual play, linking cognitive, emotional, social and speech evolution together to result in a synergistic effect that makes us uniquely human. One of the strong arguments is that SEL, as a trainable skill, has been taught to children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, impacting growth in other areas of development, but needing generalisation in real contexts. Using a pool of 80 teachers and 312 children, the second article quantitatively analyses how teachers contribute to the preschoolers’ emotional competence. The results reveal that supportive emotional environments facilitate preschoolers’ emotional knowledge and prosocial behaviour, with further interesting results for the children who experienced socio-economic risk. The third article describes the results of a pilot study of a project using a “Book-based Emotional Social Thinking” approach in Athens, Greece. These results emerged from discussions with preschoolers about their interpretation of picture book characters’ socio-emotional skills. The fourth article looks at the effects of Cognitive Remediation Therapy, targeting SEL components, in tertiary-level students with mental health issues. The fifth article looks at the impact of Study Abroad programs on college students’ SEL, and advocates for integrating SEL into global curricula

to promote social awareness and social progress, enabling society to sustain a high quality of life that allows self-actualisation.

The JRIT&L Editorial team at National University is grateful for the grand number of manuscript submissions received on SEL-related issues, and thanks all authors for their work, wishing to have been possible to make more studies known to our audience. However the publishable space was limited. The gratifying aspect of the editing process of a journal is to be able to see the creativity of human nature in its splendour. We attempted to catch a glimpse of this creativity related to the pivotal ability of developing social and emotional skills, and we forward it to our audience for a final judgement and for a good use.

Gabriela Walker, PhD

Department of Special Education, National University, Fresno, California, USA

References

- AEI/Brookings (2015), "Opportunity, responsibility, and security: a consensus plan for reducing poverty and restoring the American dream", American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and the Brookings Institution, available at: www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Full-Report.pdf
- Bateson, G. (1987), "Ecology and flexibility in an urban civilization", in Bateson, G. (Ed.), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, Jason Aronson Inc. Reprinted with a forward by Mary Catherine Bateson (2000), Northvale, NJ, University of Chicago Press, , Chicago, IL, pp. 502-513.
- Brackett, M.A., Palomera, R., Mojsa-Kaja, J., Reyes, M.R. and Salovey, P. (2010), "Emotion-regulation ability, burnout, and job satisfaction among British secondary-school teachers", *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 406-417, doi: 10.1002/pits.20478.
- CASEL (2019), "SEL impact", available at: <https://casel.org/impact/>
- Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (2015), "The economic value of social and emotional learning", Teachers College, Columbia University, available at: <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/SEL-Revised.pdf>
- Collie, R.J., Shapka, J.D. and Perry, N.E. (2011), "Predicting teacher commitment: the impact of school climate and social-emotional learning", *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 48 No. 10, pp. 1034-1048, doi: 10.1002/pits.20611.
- Collie, R.J., Shapka, J.D. and Perry, N.E. (2012), "School climate and social-emotional learning: predicting teachers stress, job satisfaction, and teaching efficacy", *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 104 No. 4, pp. 1189-1204, doi: 10.1037/a0029356.
- Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P. and Pachan, M. (2010), "A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents", *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 45 Nos 3/4, pp. 294-309, doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9300-6.
- Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D. and Schellinger, K.B. (2011), "The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions", *Child Development*, Vol. 82 No. 1, pp. 405-432, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x.
- Jones, D.E., Greenberg, M. and Crowley, M. (2015), "Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between Kindergarten social competence and future wellness", *American Public Health Association*, Vol. 105 No. 11, pp. 2283-2290, doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630.
- Klochko, V.Y. (2008), "Modern psychology: systems meaning of a Paradigm Shift", *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art*, Vol. 1, pp. 25-35, doi: 10.11621/pir.2008.0002, available at: http://psychologyinrussia.com/volumes/pdf/2008/2_Vitaliy_Y_Klochko_Psychology_2008.pdf
- Klochko, V.Y. and Galazhinsky, E.V. (2009), "Innovative potential of personality: systemic anthropological context", *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art*, Vol. 2, pp. 211-224, doi: 10.11621/pir.2009.0010, available at: http://psychologyinrussia.com/volumes/pdf/2009/09_2009_klochko_galaginskii.pdf

Lansing, J.S. (2003), "Complex adaptive systems", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 183-204, doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093440.

Lewin, K. (1936), *Principles of Topological Psychology*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.

Melnick, H., Cook-Harvey, C.M. and Darling-Hammond, L. (2017), *Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability*, Learning Policy Institute, Palo Alto, CA, available at: <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sel-new-accountability>

Ransford, C.R., Greenberg, M.T., Domitrovich, C., Small, M. and Jacobson, L. (2009), "The role of teachers' psychological experiences and perceptions of curriculum supports on the implementation of a social and emotional curriculum", *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 510-532.

Wallace, A. and Palmer, J. (2018), "Building social and emotional skills in afterschool programs: a literature review", *The National Conference of State Legislatures*, available at: www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/educ/Social_Emoional_32470.pdf

Zins, J.E. and Elias, M.J. (2007), "Social and emotional learning: promoting the development of all students", *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, Vol. 17 Nos 2/3, pp. 233-255, doi: 10.1080/10474410701413152.

Further reading

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979), *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

About the author

Dr Gabriela Walker is Associate Professor at National University, California. Growing up under communism, when freedoms and available wealth were limited, and crystalizing her personality and knowledge in an advanced democracy, Dr Walker brings a range of perspectives to education and disability studies. She also worked with the Roma (Gypsy) population with disabilities in an urban setting for five years prior to starting her graduate studies. She obtained her degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, in Global Policy Studies; the University of Georgia, USA, in Special Education; and the University of Bucharest, Romania, in Inclusive Education and Psychology. Dr Walker just ended her term as Chair of the Special Education Research Special Interest Group with the International American Educational Research Association (AERA). Current research interests include: autism spectrum disorders, methodologies for teaching special populations (including assistive technology), global special educational policies, healthicization and ecology of populations with disabilities, and disability rights.