How Early Childhood Education Uses Social and Emotional Learning

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Key Points

- What can K–12 schools do to help support social and emotional learning (SEL)? One rarely discussed idea is to analyze the world of early childhood education.
- In the best early childhood programs, SEL is an integral part of the teaching strategy and an area in which performance is carefully measured. At the same time, more research is needed on early childhood's SEL implementation and impacts.
- Early childhood's use of SEL holds out five main takeaways for K–12 leaders.

One of my wife's favorite *Saturday Night Live* skits is titled "Baby Names," in which an eight-months-pregnant wife suggests to her husband a series of names for their son.[1] Her proposals are relatively common and banal—Joseph, John, Peter, William, Fred, Sam, Paul, Jack, Ben, Todd, Harry, and Nate—but the husband rejects all of them, offering absurd potential insults that might be used against the boy if he had any of those names. The father-to-be's sensitivity is explained at the end of the skit, when it turns out that his own name is actually a naughty and embarrassing word.

The husband in that skit might have benefited from schoolmates whose social and emotional learning (SEL) skills were more developed, which raises a question many in the education reform world have been asking: What can schools do to help support social and emotional development? This question has generated a swath of research and suggestions, from the Aspen Institute's SEL report and subsequent action guide to RAND Corporation's national surveys on SEL for teachers and principals.[2]

But one rarely discussed idea is to learn from the world of early childhood education, which has spent decades wrestling with how it measures and implements SEL. At the moment, SEL seems to be valued more with younger children. For example, every state has social-emotional standards for early childhood, while as of 2018 only 14 had them for K–12.[3] In the best early childhood programs, SEL isn't an ephemeral concept used to avoid scrutiny of academic outcomes; it's an integral part of the teaching strategy and an area in which performance is carefully measured. That level of integration and attention is something SEL advocates and K–12 schools should pay attention to.

There's a Divide Between Early Childhood and K–12

For K–12 to learn from early childhood, it must be willing to pay attention to that world in the first place. There are certainly some examples of that happening, including communities—such as Boston; San Francisco; Omaha, Nebraska; and Normal, Illinois—that are building strong partnerships and national efforts to support collaborative work between these two spheres.[4] But for the most part, K–12 leaders don't pay much attention to early learning for various political and cultural reasons—including that state accountability systems push districts to focus on later years and that most K–12 leaders have little understanding of early childhood development.[5] For too many policy and practice leaders in

the K–12 world, the early years are a mysterious and unmeasured period that precedes the time when the "real work" of schooling occurs.

One challenge is that, compared to K–12, the early childhood system is smaller, more fragmented, and not compulsory. In the K–12 years, there is mutual obligation: Children are required to show up at schools, and public schools are required to take them. That is not true in early childhood, and only 43 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in publicly funded preschool.[6] For younger children, the percentages are even lower.[7]

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For those children enrolled, spending is much higher in K–12. In K–12 schools, per-pupil spending averages $11,762; for preschoolers, it's $5,172 (which includes some part-day programs).[8] This disparity is reflected in teacher salaries: The average salary for preschool teachers ($28,570) is barely more than half the average salary for kindergarten teachers ($51,640).[9] Compared to K–12, the early childhood system is spending less than half as much per child on less than half as many children.

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How SEL Is Prioritized in Early Childhood

SEL standards have been core to the early childhood field for many years; every state has SEL standards for early childhood, and most states have had those standards for a long time. A review of early learning standards in May 2002—when some states did not yet even have early learning standards—showed that 35 of the 38 states that did have standards addressed SEL.[11] During an era when access to early learning grew substantially, SEL was always a core part of its design. This inclusion has been driven by evidence that interventions aimed at strengthening SEL skills can be successful and that those SEL interventions can lead to a range of beneficial outcomes.[12]

Accordingly, some of the most prominent early childhood programs emphasize the importance of empathy and respect in adult relationships with children. For example, in the Head Start program, attention to mental health and social-emotional development is required,[13] and mental health consultants are required to be on-site to help meet the social and emotional needs of children enrolled.[14]

In addition, programs and teachers can support SEL through active engagement with parents. According to leaders at two highly rated Head Start–based programs (one in Nebraska and one in central Maine), in programs effectively implementing SEL, teachers are trained to learn about a child's home environment, which is meant to help teachers understand how best to support the child's social and emotional development. Teachers also try to talk to parents about the importance of SEL and to develop a consistent set of practices with parents. Furthermore, when teachers conduct observational assessments that measure SEL, information from those assessments can be shared with parents to inform these conversations.[15]

That active engagement with parents is actually a central design feature of early childhood programs. Family engagement is explicitly required of Head Start providers, which has a framework for family engagement and a defined set of competencies.[16] Most state preschool programs also require family engagement, and they use various frameworks to implement that requirement.[17] So early childhood programs are keenly aware that they are expected to support SEL—and engage with families in doing so. One impact of that expectation has been a focus on SEL and family engagement in teacher training and support systems.

How Early Childhood Teachers Are Trained in SEL

Desiring to improve SEL and the tools with which to measure it means little if teachers and instructional leaders don't understand how to collect information about SEL and then how to act on that information.

The work has to start with preparation programs. One survey of early childhood preparation programs in California found widespread support for SEL and some indicators of successful implementation but a recognition that more focus and capacity are needed.[18] One of the most advanced teacher preparation programs in California on SEL is San Jose State, which has increased its focus on SEL by helping teacher candidates reflect on their own SEL competencies, providing teacher candidates with specific strategies for developing a supportive and inclusive learning environment, providing specific examples of how SEL can be integrated in curriculum, and ensuring that candidates can reflect on SEL practices during student teaching.[19]

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Regardless of what preparation teachers receive, in the classroom they will require ongoing instructional support—including instructional leadership from their principal and teacher colleagues and professional development coursework. The two program leaders report that larger preschools have set up communities of practice where teachers work together to develop skills and abilities relating to SEL, including using video reviews in which they receive feedback from colleagues about how they can improve their practice. A successful community of practice will include ongoing collaboration among teachers with strong support from a leader or facilitator, which can be (but is not necessarily) the school principal. In settings where the teachers and parents are from different cultures, teachers may be given professional development specifically focused on cultural competency.[20]

One professional development strategy that has been used by some schools is to develop communities of practice that include teachers in both K–12 and early learning. If the local Head Start or state pre-K can demonstrate strong data on implementing SEL, those teachers may be a resource to their K–12 colleagues through peer-to-peer learning. If the local data don't show success in SEL, then the K–12 schools might partner with the early learning providers so that they can bring in the right experts to help them all learn together.

How SEL Is Measured in Early Childhood

For providers of early childhood education and care, SEL is measured in the context of accountability systems. Many early childhood programs are evaluated using a system called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) developed at the University of Virginia.[21] CLASS rates providers in three dimensions: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. For programs to receive the highest ratings therefore requires attention to both social-emotional and academic needs. Studies have shown numerous positive outcomes for children in preschool classrooms with higher levels of emotional support as measured by CLASS; these outcomes include higher social competence, positive engagement with teachers, and better behavior, executive functioning, and mathematics performance.[22]

SEL measurement has real stakes for early childhood programs. All Head Start programs are measured with CLASS as part of the Designation Renewal System, which rates programs and requires re-competition in places where grantee performance is low.[23] CLASS is also used to rate the quality of early learning providers in many states.[24] The stakes of CLASS ratings vary by state, but ratings are frequently tied to financial incentives that reward higher performance.

CLASS is an observational tool, so trained professionals conduct its ratings with a system for ensuring inter-rater reliability—similar to how a school inspectorate works in some European countries or an accreditation process at the K–12 level.[25] In Head Start, external reviewers visit each classroom twice and use that information to develop an overall score for the grantee.[26] One benefit of these approaches is that they provide schools with actionable information on each of the dimensions on which they are rated. In the Emotional Support domain of CLASS, early childhood providers are rated on four dimensions: positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perceptions. More detailed analyses for providers allow them to identify specific practices that can improve their ratings.

CLASS measures SEL implementation at the program and classroom level. At the population level, one validated tool used to measure social and emotional health is the Early Development Instrument (EDI).[27] This instrument measures child development in five domains—physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge—and can then be used to map populations based on how well children are doing in these areas.[28] The EDI is designed to inform community-level conversations about how children are doing and what services are needed to help them.[29]

Another emerging practice to measure social and emotional development is the kindergarten readiness assessment. In the past 15 years the use of the kindergarten readiness assessment has grown substantially around the country, as numerous states—and some national organizations—have developed new assessment tools.[30] It is generally administered by a teacher at the beginning of kindergarten to provide a system-level gauge of how children are doing—and to inform instruction.[31] While the quality of kindergarten readiness assessments varies, the best ones measure child development across the full range of domains, including SEL.[32]

How Early Childhood Performs Compared to K–12 in SEL

While more data on this subject would be useful, the data that exist suggest that early childhood outperforms higher grades in providing emotional support. One of the few studies to examine CLASS scores from pre-K through first grade found that scores for emotional support were substantially higher in pre-K. An evaluation of the Georgia Pre-K Program conducted by the University of North Carolina's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute found that 43.7 percent of pre-K classrooms scored between 6.0 and 7.0 on CLASS (the highest range), compared to 9.4 percent of first-grade classrooms. In contrast, 34.5 percent of first-grade classrooms scored below a 5.0, whereas only 10.6 percent of pre-K classrooms scored that low.[33]

Some schools have taken specific steps to strengthen their relationships with early childhood providers, which can be a key part of a strategy to improve social and emotional learning—particularly a strategy designed to engage parents. One approach is to have a dedicated staff person who works directly with families and programs beginning in early learning and continuing through at least the early elementary years. Another is for the district to enter direct contractual relationships with community-based early childhood providers, with family engagement and relationship building among the services those providers are contracted to provide. Principals can play a crucial leadership role by working with early childhood providers and the parent support staff, sending a message to parents and professionals that those connections really matter.[34]

Challenges to Adopting SEL Metrics in K–12

In early childhood, including SEL in accountability systems benefits from two important conditions. First, SEL is seen as absolutely core to the providers' mission, so including it to measure quality makes sense to them. Indeed, many early childhood providers would push back against a measurement scheme that didn't include it. Second, the tools used to measure SEL are widely respected. Both conditions are achievable in K–12, and SEL advocates should focus on achieving them before seeking to have meaningful stakes attached to any SEL measurement.

Indeed, SEL advocates should learn an important lesson from the husband in "Baby Names" about the power of repeated experience. The husband had been insulted so often for his name that he assumed any boy with any name would suffer the same fate. And in education policy, we've pounded schools with our existing accountability metrics so much that school district leaders have a visceral reaction against almost any proposed new metrics.

While we've been repeatedly warned to treat data as a flashlight rather than hammer, much of the education community unquestionably experienced No Child Left Behind as a hammer.[35] The teacher evaluation reforms of Race to the Top only exacerbated that problem. And that's had serious implications for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which gives states much more freedom to implement new accountability measures.

Even if the cultural conditions allow for it, adding SEL to state accountability systems may be a struggle from a technical standpoint. ESSA includes restrictions

on the measurements that are appropriate for use in measuring school quality. At this point, no SEL measurements fit easily in those confines.[36]

With a federal law finally reflecting a broadly held view that proficiency on tests shouldn't be the near-exclusive driver of school quality measurement, states had the opportunity to add new indicators—but in some instances found surprising resistance from local educators. Those educators might not have liked the old-fashioned fascination with tests, but they may have been harboring concerns that SEL indicators could be problematic or weaponized.

If SEL metrics are developed, they run the risk of being just one more hammer. Developing accountability metrics threatens to turn SEL into a check-the-box compliance exercise, which all but guarantees that it will be implemented in a manner that doesn't actually lead to improved experiences for students. If local K–12 leaders in a state are clamoring for SEL measures in their centralized accountability system, then of course SEL advocates should partner with them to see how to make it work. But SEL advocates will do their cause no favors by imposing SEL metrics on skeptical local educators.[37]

Five Takeaways

In an earlier report in this series, Chester E. Finn Jr. and Frederick M. Hess suggested that SEL advocates should "slow down and focus on getting it right." The experience of early childhood offers several lessons that SEL advocates can draw on in the K–12 world, most of which should come with a healthy dose of "slow down and focus on getting it right" built in.[38]

Create a culture in which SEL is central. If school leaders and teachers don't think SEL is an essential part of their job, all the standards and measurement tools in the world won't make a difference. In K–12, this culture already exists in some places, but it still needs to be built in other places. This might have to *begin* by promoting SEL as an aid to academic success but always with an eye toward the goal of establishing that SEL is a good in and of itself.

As with any initiative, K–12 leaders must lay the appropriate groundwork and provide ongoing support, or the initiative will not be successful.[39] This may be particularly true with SEL, where some practices—including ongoing communication with parents—are not ones with which teachers have deep familiarity. Pilot programs may be one way to help build capacity.[40]

Active parental involvement is essential. Making SEL work requires engaging parents in a manner that may feel unusual for many K–12 teachers. Here again local early childhood providers might have expertise to offer—and beyond their generalized knowledge, they may have already built relationships with the specific parents the K–12 system is seeking to engage.

Early childhood providers can be useful partners for schools in at least two ways. First, they can help design the best practices for parent engagement to be implemented at the K–12 level, which will include regularly conducting observational assessments of child SEL development and then communicating the results to parents as part of a conversation about creating a consistent context for that child's development. Second, they can partner with K–12 to build systems for managing the transition into K–12, so that parental relationships with educators are handed off rather than cut off and then reestablished.

Treat SEL as measurable and hold it to that standard. Don't let it slide when schools talk about doing a good job at SEL if they don't have data to back it up. It's important to celebrate schools that are doing a good job and to help schools that aren't, but none of that can happen if people don't understand the difference. A corollary to this is that trust needs to be built in the tools used to measure SEL, which may require piloting.[41]

For school leaders interested in a rigorous measurement of SEL in their building, limited tools are available (CLASS being the most prominent), and limited supports are available for successful implementation. But school leaders can take advantage of those existing tools and supports, and state education agencies can help in the short term by developing guidance on those available resources. In the longer term, policymakers can help by funding research and analysis that lead to improved SEL measurement tools and implementation assistance.

Train teachers to measure SEL. For SEL to be well implemented requires professionals who know what they're doing. Instructional leaders need to support current teachers to build the capacity they need, and preparation programs need to be redesigned to help support the next generation of teachers. This includes at a minimum the skills needed to teach SEL, assess SEL, act on the results of the assessments, and communicate results to families.

Advocates should not push for laws or regulations that are overly prescriptive about these practices, but they can play a crucial role in pushing for the funding needed to support successful implementation—which may come from both state and local sources and, in many instances, may involve redirecting professional development funds that are currently being spent on something else. In addition, if there are legal or regulatory obstacles to any of these changes, then advocates will need to work on changing those laws and rules. The capacity building and cultural change needed to successfully implement SEL will take time and money, and advocates can help communicate to policy leaders and the public the importance of the work and the need to balance their sense of urgency with the patience needed to give these changes a realistic chance of success.

Be aware that early childhood's SEL work is a work in progress. Early childhood may be ahead of K–12 in some important aspects of SEL implementation, but more can be done. The capacity to prepare and support teachers in successful SEL on an ongoing basis is emerging but has a long way to go. Parental engagement is successful in many places but far from all, so implementation support and further research on best practices could benefit both early childhood and K–12. And more research is needed on the quality of SEL implementation and its long-term impacts, which should include research using CLASS scores for different age spans.

Getting It Right

In the "Baby Names" skit, the parents-to-be settle on the name Bjaardker (which is ostensibly Icelandic).[42] That's something of a warning too: Sometimes we overthink things to the point that we ignore straightforward solutions and end up with a bizarre result. What were the odds in 1992 that a kid named Bjaardker would be teased for his name less than a Sam, Ben, or Todd? With SEL, advocates can leverage some straightforward solutions from early learning—without turning SEL into just another metric and without resorting to name-calling.

About the Author

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Notes

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36. A work group I chaired in Illinois focused on developing ESSA indicators for the preschool through second grade years came to the following conclusion about SEL: "Social-emotional development is critically important, but that does not inevitably mean that social-emotional development should be included in the accountability system; the measurements of that development may not be appropriate for accountability purposes." See Illinois State Board of Education, "ESSA P-2 Indicator Working Group Report," December 31, 2017, https://www.isbe.net/Documents/17-3249_P-2_Indicator_Working_Group_Report.pdf; and Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and the Council of Chief State School Officers, "Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework: Opportunities to Integrate Early Childhood in ESSA," 2017, https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Birth%20to%20Grade%203%20Indicator%20Framework.pdf.
37. Professor Jay P. Greene makes a similar argument in an earlier report in this series. He argues that SEL should not be made part of central accountability systems because that will undermine authentic local support for SEL. Greene's report appears to be focused on using measures of student SEL outcomes rather than SEL teaching practices, but his argument about the potential impact of SEL measurement has force regardless. The experience of early childhood suggests that Greene's hypothesis is not necessarily true in all conditions, because local support for SEL can grow to the point where it is accepted or even desired in centralized accountability. So while I disagree with what I take to be Greene's assertion that including SEL in centralized accountability is inevitably problematic, I agree with his argument that if SEL is seen as being imposed on school districts by central elites that it will set back the cause of successful SEL implementation. See Jay P. Greene, "The Moral and Religious Roots of Social and Emotional Learning," American Enterprise Institute, June 25, 2019, https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-moral-and-religious-roots-of-social-and-emotional-learning/.

38. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Frederick M. Hess, "What Social and Emotional Learning Needs to Succeed and Survive," American Enterprise Institute, April 10, 2019, https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/what-social-and-emotional-learning-needs-to-succeed-and-survive/.

39. Charles M. Payne, "Missing the Inner Intent: The Predictable Failures of Implementation," in *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group, April 2008), https://www.hepg.org/hep-home/books/so-much-reform,-so-little-change.

40. For a thorough case study on how schools can build the capacity to have successful social and emotional learning, see Hannah Melnick and Lorea Martinez, "Preparing Teachers to Support Social and Emotional Learning," Learning Policy Institute, May 2019, https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/SEL_CaseStudies_SJSU_Lakewood_REPORT.pdf.

41. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Frederick M. Hess raise this concern, and it's a real one—but for now, at least, this problem is primarily about controlling the narrative of how a school is doing. Test-based accountability is baked into federal law, and it's not going away any time soon. So the short-term danger here isn't that test-based accountability will disappear—it's that students who are falling behind academically won't get the help they need, because the people who should be helping those students will let themselves off the hook based on nebulous accomplishments in SEL. Finn Jr. and Hess, "What Social and Emotional Learning Needs to Succeed and Survive."

42. But this is actually fictitious. In Iceland parents are required to give children names from an approved list, which Bjaardker is not on. See Island.is, "Personal Names," https://www.island.is/mannanofn/leit-ad-nafni/?Samthykkt=yes&Stulkur=on&Drengir=on&Millinofn=on&Nafn=b. As for its use in the United States, according to the Social Security website, Bjaardker has not been in the top 1,000 boys names for any year since 1900.

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