

Notes on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

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Roots of SEL as an idea

The general philosophical perspective that schools are for social development as well as academic instruction has been shared by many thinkers throughout history, but today's version of "social and emotional learning" (SEL) is perhaps most foreshadowed in the work of John Dewey and other progressive social reformers of the early 20th century. Despite their best efforts, American public schools generally proceeded in a more technocratic, achievement-test driven direction.

Nevertheless, concepts that were later incorporated into the SEL movement—such as Kurt Lewin's notion of the interdependence of person and environment, Bandura's social learning theory, cognitive behavioral therapy, and affective education—as later reflected in the Martin & Reigeluth chapter in Green Book II (Reigeluth 1999)—were percolating between the 1920s and 1990s.

Evolution of SEL as a movement

Elias et al. (2008) provide an overview of the journey of the **SEL movement** from 1994 to 2008.

In that story we can find the tracks of the various confluences and definitional issues encountered along the way.

From the **founding of CASEL** (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) in **1994** until 2004, the concept of SEL was pursued mainly as an expansion of Goleman's "emotional intelligence" (1995)—which had popularized the concept of *emotional intelligence* originating in the early work of Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990). They claimed to be working on the foundation laid in the 1930s by Thorndike with the concept of "social intelligence," roughly meaning the ability to understand and manage people.

Salovey & Mayer reasoned that one could extend this notion to include oneself. Thus they define *emotional intelligence* as a subset of social intelligence "that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (189).

Note: Other literature between the 1930s and 1980s used the term "interpersonal competence" instead of "social intelligence."

Howard Gardner further boosted the claim of social or emotional "intelligence" by putting forth his theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983).

Personally, I see this loose use of "intelligence" as the 'original sin' of SEL. As Willingham (2004) points out, it makes more sense to refer to all of these **multiple abilities as TALENTS, rather than intelligences** (24), as did the early researchers—Burt, Cattell, Thurstone—who conceived the idea of *general intelligence* beginning in the early 1900s. This traditional view of intelligence is referred to as the Cattell–Horn–Carroll (CHC) theory, based on the work of Raymond B. Cattell, John L. Horn and John B. Carroll.

In 2004, the landmark handbook on SEL (Zins, et al. 2004) shifted the meaning of SEL dramatically. For one thing, the SEL movement was bringing together what had been quite separate areas of interest: the rather scientific study of emotional development and social development vs. the more value-laden, somewhat more evangelical advocacy of “moral education” and “character education.” [The latter are captured quite well in Unit 4, *Fostering Affective Development*, in Reigeluth’s *Green Book II* (1999)—as are the more explicitly instructional constructs of designing for affective and attitudinal objectives.]

Some SEL proponents in the Zins volume, namely Lopes and Salovey (2004), also cite Sternberg’s (1985) triarchic theory of intelligence, with intelligence having three major domains—analytical, creative, and practical¹. Lopes and Salovey suggest that Sternberg’s “practical intelligence” encompasses social and emotional competencies (84).

Lopes and Salovey suggest, somewhat confusingly, that “emotional intelligence” should be distinguished from “broader conceptions of social and emotional competence and adaptation” (88).

In any event, they agree with other authors in this volume that SEL should be infused into the school curriculum in the form **both of explicit instruction and implicit learning** by means of everyday experiences in living in a School Environment that encourages cooperative learning and opportunities for making choices about their daily lives, plus the prosocial behavior modeling by teachers and other adults. [Side issue: Since they encourage infusing SEL into academic instruction, they also imply that SEL contributes to higher academic achievement.]

Elias et al. point out that CASEL (following Goleman), viewed SEL as a cluster of skills related to emotional intelligence: “self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship management” (Elias, Parker, et al. 2008, 13)

Note that these skills suggest a degree of explicit learning (you are conscious of pursuing them and mastering them). Also notice that the listed skills are canted toward the *emotional* domain (as opposed to *social*). [How does this fit any definition of intelligence-as-an-aptitude??]

Elias et al. say that the CASEL folks were eager to connect SEL with academic achievement; they were proposing that schooling could deliver the total package—traditional academic-knowledge skills AND the “life skills” of SEL.

***Note that, at least in the Zins volume (2004), there is not a clear case made for SEL *improving* academic achievement. Rather, it *complements* academic achievement.

By 2008, continuing on from the Zins volume, the formerly separate movements—SEL, moral education, and character education—are trying to amalgamate into one movement (as indicated in the title of the Elias et al. chapter (*Social and Emotional Learning, Moral Education, and Character Education: A Comparative Analysis and a View toward Convergence*). For more on Moral Education and its categories, see SEL Appendix D.

More recently. A more recent retrospective review (Osher, et al. 2016) reviews the findings of research on SEL and its implementation in schools over the past two decades. As they observe: “As in the case of other types of educational interventions, evaluations of the effects of school-based SEL programs vary in rigor and generalizability” (658). They also point out that:

Registries of the research evidence can be searched online by program and target population characteristics (i.e., the What Works Clearinghouse reviews of interventions under the topic of Student Behavior [<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topic.aspx?sid=15>] and the National

¹ A conception that is challenged by psychometricians as unempirical, noting that general intelligence (“g”) is highly intercorrelated with many types of creative and practical aptitudes.

Most recently. One of the authors of the Osher et al. team is **Stephanie M. Jones** of Harvard, whose most recent work brings this review of SEL right up to date. She went on to found The Taxonomy Project at Harvard, promoted through the EASEL website <<https://easel.gse.harvard.edu/taxonomy-project>>.

Jones's sharp critique of the problems in the SEL universe is expressed in a paper on her website: (Jones, et al. 2016). She identifies some of the terminological problems, but downplays some of the conceptual problems; however, she does propose some partial solutions.

- Problems that Jones identifies:
 - “Jingle” fallacy: one term describing two different things: virtually every term used in the SEL literature has multiple meanings...see *emotional intelligence, non-cognitive domain, soft skills*, and dozens of others.
 - “Jangle” fallacy: two or more different terms, referring to the same object: e.g., the behavior of being agreeable may be referred to as a personality trait, a learned interpersonal skill, or an aspect of emotional intelligence. [The jingle-jangle problem is earlier identified by a pair of economists at Brookings (Reeves and Venator 2014)].
- Problems that Jones misses or downplays:
 - Her own adoption of the umbrella term *non-cognitive domain*—a total misnomer. Many critics have pointed out that most, if not all, of the traits or skills in the SEL conversation have a cognitive component. Further, *domain* is another misnomer. The traits and skills in the SEL conversation are all over the map—cognitive domain, affective domain, interpersonal domain. If the term *domain* has ANY meaning in educational psychology, it cannot be used here.
 - Jones properly points out that the many different proponents of SEL cloak their concepts in many different “frameworks.” She rejects the idea of winnowing the elements and constructing one comprehensive framework, opting to let users choose the framework that suits their needs. [However, she herself has a pretty good framework (Jones and Bouffard 2012).]

Jones and the EASEL website offer some of the most recent and sophisticated review of Conceptual Frameworks for SEL. See SEL Appendix C.

Problematic Constructs

1. Construct validity. There are many Construct Validity (jingle-jangle) fallacies infesting the discussion, and they have grown over time. Initially, there was just the problem of defining *social* and *emotional* each by itself; then came the problem of defining the amalgam of the two—*social and emotional learning (SEL)*. Now there is the problem of differentiating between the construct of *social and emotional learning (SEL)* and the many closely related constructs that sometimes serve as surrogates: *non-cognitive factors, soft skills, life skills, character, and 21st-Century skills*. The latter problem is discussed in Berg et al. (February 2017, 8).

Of all people, Daniel Willingham, a hard-nosed psychometrician, takes a tolerant view of the proliferation of ill-defined constructs. “Crisp definitions of constructs and taxonomies of how they relate are not prerequisites for doing science. They are the outcome of doing science. We fumble along with provisional definitions and refine them as we go along” (Willingham 2013). However, that was seven years ago. Is it still OK for SEL to have so much jingle-jangle?

2. Intelligences. Are the SEL abilities best construed as “intelligences,” that is, largely innate **aptitudes**? If so, which are the superordinate, coordinate, or subordinate domains? Is “emotional intelligence” subsumed into “social intelligence?” Are one or the other or both subsumed under “practical intelligence?” Are they part of

the hierarchy under “g,” general intelligence or are they somehow separate? And equal?

- a. I am inclined to see “multiple intelligences” as a red herring here. Accepting Goleman’s view does not help understand the dynamic forces at work in the brain as children learn various executive control functions or other social or emotional learnings. Rejecting the “intelligences” view merely clears some of the brush away from the already complex landscape. See Appendix A.
 - b. As it happens, “emotional intelligence” has dropped out of the conversation by the mid-2010s. Neither Salovey nor Goleman appear in recent research reviews, like AIR’s 2017 report (Berg, et al. February 2017). This is also noted in SEL Appendix A.
 - c. As is also discussed in SEL Appendix A, there is a valid question as to the conception of “Aptitude” as a fixed, inherited trait.
3. Learned competencies. Are SEL abilities best construed as learned competencies? If so, to what domains of learning do they pertain? The SEL advocates have, somehow, not managed to challenge the reigning model of Bloom’s Taxonomy and complement it with a taxonomy that fills the gaps in Bloom. Do SEL objectives fit into the updated Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson, et al. 2001)? Certainly not all of them. See SEL Appendix C.
 4. Domains or hierarchies of learning. In either case, exactly what are these innate or learned competencies, and is there any hierarchical or other structure into which they fit? See SEL Appendix C.
 5. Explicit or implicit learning. If SEL competencies are learned, are they learned implicitly or explicitly? It appears to be both, but one searches in vain for a list of which are which. Elias (2006) makes the clearest claim for explicit teaching:

“Social-emotional and life skills **must be taught explicitly at the elementary and secondary levels. Like reading or math**, if social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not be internalized and become part of a child’s lifelong repertoire of valued activities” (7).

Elias compares SEL to reading and math, both of which are man-made, artificial formulations that require decoding skills that are unlikely to be gained by everyday experience. Social and emotional learning do not seem to be comparable at all. However, it might still be true that consciously attaching verbal labels to emotional states makes those states more manageable, and practice in taking the perspective of another builds empathy. Meanwhile, executive control functions located in the frontal lobe (such as attention, concentration, and self-control) can be strengthened through planned practice. [This is elaborated in terms of brain development by Kusché & Greenberg in several publications, including (Kusché and Greenberg 2006).]

6. SEL promoting academic achievement. What role does SEL play in academic achievement? Both the “old” SEL and “new” SEL are ambivalent about whether they are strongly interested in academic achievement as the goal of SEL. Much of their rhetoric claims that they are interested in the sorts of “life skills” (e.g. being a valued employee in a context of agile businesses and multiple careers...or being a good citizen in a democratic society) that are separable from traditional academic domains—reading, writing, math, science, and other cognitive accomplishments.

On the other hand, proponents often try to point out that the conditions (*Classroom Environment* and *School Environment*) that support social/emotional development also contribute to meaningful or “deep” learning of academic subjects. In other words, “we are all about creating better citizens, but, by the way, when we do so we also motivate students to work more earnestly at their academic tasks.”

Where does SEL Fit within any Framework of Learned Competencies?

As suggested by the above list of problematic constructs, it is extremely difficult to place the claims of SEL on the Molenda-Subramony Framework of **Instructed Learning** (Molenda and Subramony 2021).

(NOTE that one of the major assumptions of the M & S Framework is that the factors identified and the connections among them have been discovered and validated through educational research—often comparing Method A with Method B, using artificial tests as the measure of accomplishment.) Therefore, *instructed learning* equals *that which is measured by achievement tests*.

But SEL is not concerned solely, or even primarily with instructed learning.

- Some people’s conception of SEL consists of explicit, consciously acquired social/emotional instructed learnings. That is, sometimes SEL is a subject to be studied. So, it sits squarely on the M&S Framework alongside all the other academic subjects.
- According to some other people’s conception of SEL, it serves as *Motivation to Learn*, prompting *Effort* toward the achievement of traditional academic instructed learnings. So, it fits neatly in the M&S Framework in the box of *Motivation to Learn*.
- Sometimes, SEL consists of a set of interventions at the classroom level that are intended to change the classroom climate (*Classroom Environment* box) to make it more supportive of the implicit inculcation of democratic habits.
 - Of course, advocates are quick to point out that the intervention at the classroom level requires intervention at the school-wide level—(*School Environment* box)—if it is to be pervasive and sustainable. See SEL Appendix B.
- BUT sometimes, SEL does not fit on the Framework at all because its intended outcome is to **inculcate unconscious, implicit habits**, NOT instructed learnings. The advocacy of SEL proponents suggests that educators should broaden their perspective on how to measure school success, adding “life skills” as complements to academic skills.
 - This suggests that another Framework is needed to map those interventions that are aimed at unconscious, implicit attitudes and behavioral habits (e.g., instinctively responding as a participant in a democratic society).

See **SEL Appendix C** for a discussion of Conceptual Frameworks.

Bottom Line

My conclusions:

1. SEL is an important construct, both because of its national and international popularity, but also because it touches on an aspect of school outcomes—adaptation to one’s social milieu—that is historically viewed as one of the most crucial contributions of schools to society.
2. SEL is an extraordinarily fuzzy construct. It is rife with jingle and jangle fallacies. There is scant consensus on either the intended outcomes of SEL or how those outcomes ought to be named or measured.
3. Whatever are the elements of SEL, there is no consensus, and little deep thinking, about what “domains” of learning or of aptitude they should be classified into.
4. Along with the construct validity problem and the classification problem there is a conceptual framework problem.
 - a. At first this problem was ignored, but as more and constructs were dragged into the arena, the framing problem became more concerning. It has been addressed in a major way by several

interrelated projects—conducted by AIR, NRC, OECD, and Harvard’s Taxonomy Project (the last draws on all the preceding ones).

- b. Today there is a plethora of proposed conceptual frameworks (136, according to the count of AIR). I would judge all but one (Jones and Bouffard 2012) as badly lacking the components expected of a framework for a complex phenomenon in the universe of education.
5. Despite all these problems, I believe **there is something real** in the confused cluster of ideas about SEL. There is a lot of evidence—anecdotal, qualitative, and quantitative, that something useful happens when one of the SEL manifestations is implemented in a school. Some combination of factors—some active ingredient—seems to be at work, heightening students’ motivation to learn and/or lowering social tensions and/or reducing violence and/or increasing individual resilience and “grit,” and the like. The outcome measures are all over the map, from achievement scores to personality traits, but they all seem to improve when SEL is implemented.
 - a. Clearly, school people believe this because they are investing a lot of time and money in implementing SEL innovations, under one brand name or another.
 - b. OECD, which is driven by economic concerns, is also investing greatly in disseminating SEL to member countries.
 6. A future project of the Elements of Instruction Group is to develop a revision of the Molenda-Subramony framework (Molenda and Subramony 2021) that accommodates SEL objectives and the factors that influence the successful achievement of those objectives. **See SEL Appendix E.**

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