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To cite this article: Eva Oberle, Celene E. Domitrovich, Duncan C. Meyers & Roger P. Weissberg (2016) Establishing systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: a framework for schoolwide implementation, Cambridge Journal of Education, 46:3, 277-297, DOI: [10.1080/0305764X.2015.1125450](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1125450)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1125450>



Published online: 02 Feb 2016.



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Establishing systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: a framework for schoolwide implementation

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a fundamental part of education. Incorporating high-quality SEL programming into day-to-day classroom and school practices has emerged as a main goal for many practitioners over the past decade. The present article overviews the current state of SEL research and practice, with a particular focus on the United States. The need for a model of SEL that goes beyond the classroom is illustrated, and a systemic approach to implementing SEL school-wide is introduced. It is argued that school-wide SEL maximises the benefits of SEL programming by becoming the organising framework for fostering students' potential as scholars, community members, and citizens. Further, a Theory of Action (ToA) developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is presented that serves as a blueprint for implementing systemic SEL in schools. Potential challenges and barriers involved in moving toward school-wide SEL implementation are considered and discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 August 2015
Accepted 19 November 2015

KEYWORDS

Social and emotional learning (SEL); systemic; school-wide SEL implementation

There has been a great expansion of interest in social and emotional learning (SEL) in education during the last two decades (Humphrey, 2013; Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). A multitude of programmes and strategies designed to teach and foster SEL have been developed, implemented and reviewed since the turn of the century, with the conclusion that SEL is an essential component for learning and success in life (Weare & Gray, 2003; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Schools are critical contexts for promoting SEL because children spend a significant portion of their time in school, and previous research has successfully established a link between well-implemented SEL programming in schools and positive social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012).

Recent discussions among scholars in the field of SEL promotion in schools have stressed that, in addition to classroom-based programming, school-wide SEL strategies are also

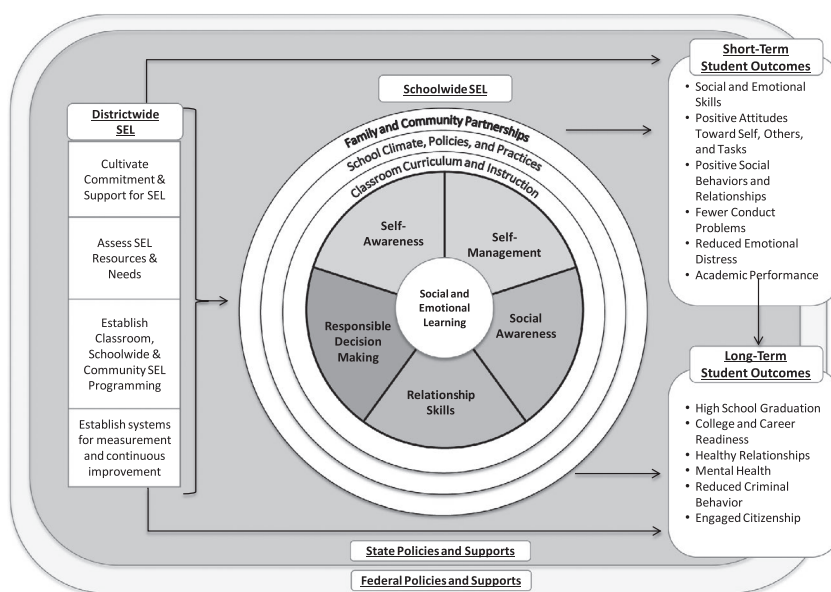


Figure 1. Conceptual model illustrating system-wide SEL in educational settings. Source: Figure 1 was originally published in Weissberg et al. (2015).

needed (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Meyers et al., 2015; Weare, 2000; Weissberg et al., 2015). A school-wide approach – also known as ‘whole-school approach’ – defines the entire school community as the unit of change and aims to integrate SEL into daily interactions and practices at multiple setting levels in the school using collaborative efforts that include all staff, teachers, families and children (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Meyers et al., 2015). This systemic approach helps create a supportive context for introducing and maintaining effective SEL programming for all students and moves schools away from piecemeal and fragmented approaches of SEL to one that is comprehensive and coordinated in both planning and implementation (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Putting school-wide SEL into action requires a supportive educational system that prioritises students’ social and emotional competence and allocates the necessary resources to develop the structures needed to conduct and sustain high-quality SEL programming (Mart, Weissberg, & Kendziora, 2015). Systemic support at higher organisational levels (e.g. national, state/province, district¹) enables administrators at the building level (i.e. school, classroom) to provide the supports that are needed for the implementation and sustainability of effective SEL practices and educational practices (CASEL, 2015; Meyers et al., 2015).

There is growing international interest in school-based SEL (Torrente, Alimchandani, & Aber, 2015). For example, several countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have launched national initiatives for school-wide SEL programming in the past decade. For instance, English government provides annual funds for implementing ‘Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning’ (SEAL) as a national strategy to enhance social-emotional well-being, mental health, and behavioural skills in schools (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2013). SEAL is a whole-school approach to SEL that is free of cost for schools and is supported by schools’ Local Authorities (e.g. through training opportunities) (Department for Children, Schools, & Families, 2009). In 2010, SEAL was

being implemented in approximately two-thirds of primary schools and 15% of secondary schools (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2010; Weare, 2010). In Australia, a nationally overarching strategy of KidsMatter (Slee et al., 2009, 2012) has been established under support of the Australian government and beyondblue (<http://www.beyondblue.org.au>; a national non-for-profit organisation in Australia). The KidsMatter (<http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au>) framework for primary schools functions as a broad enabling framework that supports schools in implementing SEL school-wide. By 2014, the Australian government had funded a national roll-out of the initiative in up to 2000 primary schools.

Successful integration of SEL into the school context has become a vital topic in education over the past years. Scholars, policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders are eager to provide children with opportunities to develop, learn and practise social-emotional skills in educational settings (Humphrey, Kalambouka, Bolton, et al., 2008; Weare, 2000; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Many teachers express a strong interest in integrating SEL into their practices with children, but they need the support and resources to do so (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2009). Hence, this special issue on social and emotional learning in schools is appearing in a timely manner to reflect on the theoretical, empirical and practical status quo for successful SEL in education, and to identify the next steps for moving the science and practice of SEL further forward.

In this opening article for the special issue, we summarise the current state of SEL programming in education and provide rationales for a school-wide approach to SEL implementation. We further introduce guidelines developed in the educational context of the United States for implementing SEL systemically. We begin by defining SEL and sharing perspectives for why it is an essential component of education. Next, we propose a conceptual framework for systemic SEL that illustrates how students' social-emotional competences can be best enhanced through coordinated school-wide strategies that extend to family and community programming, and are sustained by a larger system of support at administrative and educational policy levels. Last, we describe the Theory of Action (ToA) as a practical blueprint for achieving school-wide SEL. The ToA was developed at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), and guides schools in implementing SEL systemically (Meyers et al., 2015). We introduce core guidelines and activities outlined in the ToA, and describe a randomised controlled trial currently under way to evaluate the effectiveness of systemic support as outlined in the ToA.

What is SEL and why is it so important?

SEL is the process of providing all children and adolescents with the opportunities to learn, acquire and practise the social-emotional competences needed to succeed in life (Greenberg et al., 2003; Osher, Sprague, Weissberg, Keenan, & Zins, 2008; Payton et al., 2000; Zins et al., 2004). Parents, educators and society at large have long agreed that by the time young people graduate from high school they should have developed core academic competences and, most notably, have become independent, socially skilled, well-rounded young citizens who are ready to responsibly navigate their own personal and professional pathways into early adulthood (Greenberg et al., 2003). Despite this shared notion, SEL often does not receive the necessary amount of time and resources it requires in schools and classrooms

(Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Even though many teachers are eager to incorporate SEL in their educational practices, the lack of a supportive system that facilitates teaching core SEL competences often presents a barrier difficult to cross (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Defining core SEL competences

In 1994, CASEL was founded as an international organisation with the mission to establish evidence-based SEL as an essential part of preschool through to high school education. In 1997, a core group of scholars at CASEL published *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*, presenting a list of 39 guidelines that inform educational practices by supporting educators in implementing SEL (Elias et al., 1997). Broadly speaking, the goals of CASEL are to advance the science of SEL, expand effective SEL practice, and improve federal and state policies that support the implementation of SEL programming. In defining what SEL entails, CASEL has identified five core intrapersonal, interpersonal and cognitive competences (see Figure 1) that are interrelated and reflect the cognitive, affective and behavioural domains of SEL (CASEL, 2013; Payton et al., 2000; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007; Elias et al., 1997):

1. *Self-awareness* involves the ability to identify and recognise one's own emotions, thoughts, and their influences on behaviour. It includes recognising strengths and challenges in one's self, and being aware of one's own goals and values. High levels of self-awareness require recognising how thoughts, feelings and actions are interconnected.
2. *Self-management* entails the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours effectively, including stress management, impulse control, motivating oneself, and working towards achieving personal and academic goals.
3. *Social awareness* is the ability to take the perspective of others – including those who come from a different background and culture, to empathise with others, understand social and ethical norms, and to recognise resources and supports in family, school and community.
4. *Relationship skills* provide children with the tools to form and maintain positive and healthy relationships, communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, negotiate constructively during conflict, and to offer and seek help when needed.
5. *Responsible decision-making* skills equip children with the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about their own behaviour and social interactions, taking into account safety concerns, ethical standards, social and behavioural norms, consequences, and the well-being of self and others.

Children who are proficient in core SEL competences are able to integrate feeling, thinking and behaving to master important tasks in school and life (Zins et al., 2004). Those children competently recognise and manage their emotions, form healthy relationships with peers and adults, set realistic and positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions (Elias et al., 1997). Competence in core SEL skills is critical for positive outcomes in the school context. SEL competences facilitate effective communication with peers and teachers, help in setting and achieving academic goals, increase motivation to learn, and increase commitment to school, all of which are important aspects of thriving in the school context (Zins et al., 2004).

Linking SEL to academic learning

As schools are increasingly held accountable for students' academic achievement, many educators are concerned that allocating time towards SEL sacrifices time to teach core academic skills. This reflects a traditional perspective on academic and social-emotional skills as distinct domains of development. Research conducted over the past few decades supports what many psychologists and educators believe, which is that skills in these domains are in fact interrelated and foster one another (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2008; Izard et al., 2001; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman, & Zumbo, 2014).

The relationship between social-emotional and academic domains is not surprising given the fact that learning in the school context is inherently a social process. It occurs as students interact with their peers, teachers and staff members, and through a process of collaboration, negotiation and cooperation in social situations (Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013; Zins et al., 2004). Hence, socially and emotionally competent children tend to be better integrated in the school and classroom context, and can focus on the academic tasks provided to them, compared with children who struggle socially and emotionally (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Payton et al., 2000; Zins et al., 2007; Zins & Elias, 2006). The influence of SEL on academic outcomes has been comprehensively tested in three large, rigorously conducted meta-analytic reviews (Durlak et al., 2011; January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Specifically, findings from these studies revealed that students who received SEL programming in addition to the regular educational classroom curriculum showed improved academic outcomes compared with those who did not receive any additional SEL in their classrooms.

Furthermore, research indicates that earlier academic skills also predict later social-emotional skills in the school context (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & Neil, 2001). The authors' explanation for this finding is that students with better academic skills are more 'at ease' in school and tend to be more accepted by their peers; they experience less frustration in the school setting, have more friends and overall more opportunities to develop and practise social-emotional skills (Welsh et al., 2001). Additional research regarding the mechanisms linking academic and social-emotional competence is needed but the findings to date suggest a bi-directional relationship between these two developmental domains (Farrington et al., 2012).

The benefits of SEL for teachers

Whereas the majority of research has focused on identifying benefits of SEL for students, some initial empirical research and theoretical considerations suggest that the benefits of SEL may also extend to teachers (Cain & Carnellor, 2008). In classrooms in which SEL is implemented effectively, teachers need to spend less time on classroom management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In fact, a recent study of two classroom-based SEL interventions found that teachers who implemented a comprehensive model that integrated an SEL programme with a positive behaviour programme reported higher levels of efficacy and personal accomplishment at the end of one year compared with teachers in control classrooms and teachers who implemented the positive behaviour programme alone (Domitrovich et al., 2015). Feeling competent in implementing SEL in the classroom has

further been linked to experiencing a less disruptive and more positive classroom climate, and reporting lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction and higher teaching efficacy (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012).

In contrast, when teachers fail to effectively manage social and emotional challenges in the school and classroom context, children tend to show lower levels of on-task behaviour, disruptive behaviours increase, and teachers tend resort to reactive and punitive approaches. In the context of an increasingly deteriorating classroom climate and punitive approaches to maintain classroom management, teachers often feel emotionally exhausted and find themselves in what has been called a 'burnout cascade' (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). More research is needed advance the field of 'benefits of SEL programming for educators'. In particular, questions about the domains in which teachers tend to benefit from using SEL programming, and the pathways from adopting SEL approaches to positive outcomes in teachers, need to addressed (Domitrovich et al., 2015)

SEL in times of risk and challenge

Teaching SEL gains particular importance in the context of rising mental health issues, behavioural problems and substance use, which jeopardize young people's positive development and success in life (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2013). In fact, the latest *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (Kann et al., 2014) that surveyed 10- to 17-year-old youth in the United States indicated that, in 2013, 30% of students reported feeling sad and hopeless every day during the 30 days before the survey; 17% had seriously considered attempting suicide in the 12 months before the survey; 20% had been bullied on school property; 25% had been involved in at least one physical fight; 7% had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property; and 21% reported having consumed at least five alcoholic drinks in a row on at least one day during the 30 days before the survey. Such alarmingly high numbers of problematic and risky behaviours and mental health concerns pose a significant risk for young people, for which social and emotional competences, among others, can act as a core protective factor (Dryfoos, 1997).

Further research has revealed that an increasing number of students feel little connection to and disengaged at school (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004). Disengagement at school is a critical warning sign because it has been linked to school dropout, problem behaviours and conduct problems in later life (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Taken together, children and youth in our society today are faced with considerable challenges that can jeopardise their chances for success and positive development in the future. SEL is an important foundation for positive development because it is an effective strategy to counteract those challenges, and equips children with the tools and assets needed to make good, healthy and responsible decisions that navigate them towards successful outcomes in life. In short, SEL is significant for life success and needs to be a key component of every child's education.

Putting SEL into practice

The term 'learning' is a strong and intentional aspect of SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015). Focusing on learning implies that social and emotional competences can be acquired, practiced, enhanced, improved and fostered in all children (Bernard, 2006). Social and emotional

competences are most effectively taught in supportive, caring and well-managed learning environments, in which cooperation and mutual respect are the cultural norm (Zins & Elias, 2006). Such contexts encourage students to explore new activities, behaviours, skills and strategies in a safe setting that allows one to make mistakes, adjust, and learn with practice and example. One of the most effective ways to incorporate SEL into educational practice is choosing high-quality and scientifically sound educational strategies and intervention programmes, and implementing them with high fidelity (Bond & Hauf, 2004; CASEL, 2003, 2013, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; January et al., 2011).

Researchers in the field of SEL programme evaluation recommend that effective SEL programmes and approaches follow the characteristics of being SAFE: *Sequenced* (including a connected and coordinated set of activities), *Active* (including active forms of learning), *Focused* (including at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills), and *Explicit* (targeting specific social and emotional skills) (Durlak et al., 2011). A more detailed overview and discussion of SEL programme characteristics and the role of implementation is provided elsewhere in this Special Issue (see Durlak, this Special Issue).

Only if SEL is implemented effectively can we expect students to gain the maximum benefits in the form of positive student outcomes (Buchanan et al., 2009; Dix, Slee, Lawson, & Keeves, 2012; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). An effective approach to promoting SEL needs to be research-based, integrated into school practices, and take into account the particular needs and challenges of a given school (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Meyers et al., 2015). SEL practices in schools yield most successful outcomes when they are organised, connected with other school activities and embedded into the day-to-day curriculum – hence, reflecting a school-wide approach to SEL programming (Greenberg et al., 2003). Theoretical support for a school-wide approach to implementing SEL also comes from the comprehensive school-wide reform movement; to achieve the desired change through reforms, comprehensive school reform argues for the need for systematically improving entire schools rather than particular sub-populations, subjects, programmes or instructional methods within a school (Desimone, 2002).

Jones and Bouffard (2012) summarised four principles of SEL development that support the move toward school-wide programming: First, SEL skills need to be fostered consistently and with continuity. Because SEL competences develop across contexts, efforts need to be school-wide, coherently connecting and extending activities and approaches in the micro-contexts (e.g. classroom, playground, library) within the larger educational context. Furthermore, ongoing promotion of SEL skills is critical because earlier skills lay the foundation for later skills in development (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). Second, SEL and academic skills develop in interrelation with each other. By using strategies and programmes that integrate SEL into educational practices, multiple skills can be practised and developed simultaneously, lessening the time pressure of additional programmes in the school context. Third, SEL skills develop in social contexts. Hence, teacher–student relationships, peer relationships and staff–student relationships form the first and foremost platform for developing and practising social-emotional skills in the school context. School-wide SEL strategies ensure that students have opportunities to develop and practise SEL competences across all social contexts within the school. Last, classrooms and schools operate as interconnected systems; school-wide SEL efforts can shape the social culture, climate and norms consistently within those systems by setting positive standards and expectations, and fostering a school-wide shared vision that promotes SEL competences.

In conclusion, when support is in the right place, evidence-based SEL practices can be integrated into educational practices in a systematic way through school-wide programming, and become a core part of students' day-to-day educational experiences. Developing and implementing school-wide SEL strategies and programmes, and offering professional development support for teachers and staff are the bases for ensuring high-quality SEL programming that is sustainable over time. Taking it one step further, SEL programming should not stop at the school gate. Schools need to actively form partnerships with communities and families to bridge SEL into the different ecological contexts in which young people develop, and form a common language and shared practices that enter all of children's developmental milieux (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Garbacz, Swanger-Gagné, & Sheridan, 2015; Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Children's and adolescents' social and emotional proficiency needs to be a shared vision and a common goal of families, communities, schools and broader educational systems that is pursued together through collaboration and partnership (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Mart et al., 2015).

A conceptual model for school-wide SEL

At the most basic level, school-wide SEL occurs in the classroom, playground, hallways and cafeteria through interactions between students and teachers, among staff, and between students and their peers. These proximal influences have traditionally been the primary focus of SEL promotion and have resulted in the development, implementation and evaluation of a multitude of classroom-based SEL interventions geared to foster students' social and emotional skills (CASEL, 2013). Moving forward, more recent research in the field of SEL promotion highlights the importance of broadening the approach from classroom-wide to school- and community-wide SEL programming, considering the importance of school characteristics for successful SEL programming (Beets et al., 2008; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). Recently, CASEL has developed a framework in which high-quality SEL programming is initiated and sustained school-wide, on the basis of ongoing structural support and resources provided at higher levels of the educational system (i.e. school district, state/province, and national policies) (CASEL, 2013, 2015; Mart et al., 2015; Meyers et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015).

Figure 1 illustrates CASEL's conceptual framework of systemic SEL that was first published in the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (Weissberg et al., 2015). The framework highlights (a) five interrelated domains of cognitive, affective and behavioural competences that provide a foundation to navigate school and life successfully; (b) short- and long-term attitudinal and behavioural outcomes resulting from evidence-based SEL programming that targets the development of competences in these five domains; (c) coordinated classroom, school, family and community strategies that enhance children's social-emotional development and academic performance; and (d) district, state and federal policies and supports that foster quality SEL implementation and better student outcomes.

Core SEL competences and short and long-term outcomes

The five core competences in the centre of Figure 1 are described in an earlier section of this paper. They include knowledge, skills and attitudes that reflect intrapersonal, interpersonal

and cognitive competence, and are in alignment with other approaches that define SEL skills (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Mastering the core SEL competences is critical because they provide the foundation for the short- and long-term positive student outcomes illustrated on the right-hand side of Figure 1. The short-term effectiveness of SEL programming is well established (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Farrington et al., 2012; Payton et al., 2008; Sklad et al., 2012).

Given that the field of SEL is still relatively young, the number of research studies that provide evidence for the theorised long-term effectiveness of SEL programming is still emerging. Several longitudinal studies support the effectiveness of SEL programming over time. For example, children and adolescents who participated in school-based SEL programming, compared with a comparison group, showed improved problem-solving skills (Espada, Griffin, Pereira, Orgilés, & García-Fernández, 2012), reduced behavioural problems (Fraser, Lee, Kupper, & Day, 2011), and improved stress-related coping (Kraag, Van Breukelen, Kok, & Hosman, 2009) six to 18 months after programme completion. A small number of studies have also tracked SEL intervention outcomes from childhood to adulthood. For example, the 'Seattle Social Development Project' (see <http://www.ssd-p-tip.org>) has followed a cohort of 808 children throughout their adolescent years up to the age of 33 to assess the longitudinal effectiveness of SEL. Some select and important research findings in this project were that greater social and emotional competence was linked to increased chances to enter college, career success, better mental health, engaged citizenship and a lower rate of sexually transmitted infections in adulthood (Hawkins et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2014). These findings are encouraging. In addition, a recent meta-analytic study of more than 80 school-based universal intervention evaluations revealed that positive student outcomes could be sustained over time (i.e. for at least six months after programme completion), supporting the long-term effectiveness of SEL interventions (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2015).

Coordinated SEL activities and policies across environmental contexts

As illustrated in Figure 1, students' social and emotional competences need to be promoted through strategies that are embedded within ecological contexts, namely the classroom, school, family and community in which children learn and develop. Effective *classroom-level SEL* involves teaching and modelling social-emotional competence, fostering social skills in interpersonal situations with students, and providing continuous and consistent opportunities to build, advance and practise social-emotional skills safely (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Bierman et al., 2008; CASEL, 2013, 2015; Rimm-Kaufmann & Hulleman, 2015; Williamson, Modecki, & Guerra, 2015). SEL can be directly taught through the implementation of evidence-based intervention programmes as well as through adult modelling and embodiment of these skills; this can form a strong foundation for further enhancing, practising and strengthening social-emotional skills informally throughout the school day (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, SEL can be infused into the existing classroom curriculum, for instance by drawing from literature in Social Studies and English Language Studies that offers natural opportunities for discussing emotions, behaviours and relationships (Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Jones, Brown, & Lawrence Aber, 2011; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Yoder, 2013; Zins et al., 2004).

At the *school level*, SEL strategies typically take the form of policies, practices or structures that are in place to promote a positive school climate, and a culture that helps children to develop positively across academic, personal and social domains (Cohen, 2006; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Meyers et al., 2015). For example, such practices and policies can include: formulating a code of conduct that specifies social, emotional and behavioural norms, values and expectations for students and staff at school; restorative discipline practices; anti-bullying prevention guidelines; SEL-focused professional learning opportunities; opportunities to notice and reinforce positive behaviours among staff and students; and a general focus on prosocial behaviour, kindness, helping others and having gratitude. All educators and staff in schools need to be prepared and trained to competently implement SEL strategies inside and outside of the classroom. This can be realised through high-quality professional development programmes that reach current teachers, or by preparing prospective teachers during their in-service teacher training (Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015). To achieve consistency and establish a multi-tier system of support for SEL, all staff (i.e. teachers, counsellors, psychologists, social workers, librarians, administrators and other school members) need to be included in the efforts to establish school-wide practices of SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015).

In addition to classroom- and school-based approaches, *family and community programming* (see Figure 1) can extend SEL into the home and neighbourhood context – the two developmental contexts in which children spend most of their time when out of school (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Garbacz et al., 2015; Gullotta, 2015). School–family partnerships can be particularly important when promoting SEL in younger children, whose primary focus is still the family when defining their own values, social goals and acceptable behaviours and practices. Community partners can extend school-based SEL by providing students with additional opportunities to apply learned SEL skills in various practical situations (e.g. during after-school programmes and other community programmes) (Fagan, Hawkins, & Shapiro, 2015; Garbacz et al., 2015).

District, state and federal support for school-wide SEL programming

The box on the left-hand side in Figure 1 reflects that school-wide SEL programming is most likely to be successful, effective and sustainable when the necessary support of *school district* leaders, educational stakeholders, school boards and unions is in place (Mart et al., 2015). District leaders can form and communicate a vision of SEL, advocate for policies that support integration of SEL, and allocate the required resources to SEL programming in schools. School districts can also create a structure that enables school-wide SEL implementation, and put into place professional development in SEL implementation for all staff (CASEL, 2015; Mart et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015).

The *federal* and the *state* levels constitute the broadest ecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in which the foundations for successful SEL programming need to be established. Federal and state policies are powerful in communicating a culture of ‘what matters’ in school learning, by defining age-specific standards for learning and achievement, and setting expectations for student outcomes in different learning domains (Dusenbury et al., 2015; Wright, Lamont, Wandersman, Osher, & Gordon, 2015; Zaslow, Mackintosh, Mancoll, & Mandell, 2015). Providing clear goals and development benchmarks in SEL at the state level can guide school districts to include SEL programming in their educational planning,

develop the required professional development opportunities for staff, monitor implementation processes and assess the student outcomes in alignment with the communicated state standards in SEL.

In this section, we have illustrated that enhancing students' social, emotional and academic competences in a consistent and continuous manner calls for a systemic approach to SEL implementation. SEL needs to be integrated into the day-to-day practices at school, conducted school-wide, offer connection points for family and community programming, and be supported by the educational systems within which schools are embedded. School-wide SEL approaches and strategies need to be systemic and include all staff, teachers and students. In the following section, we provide an example of a project being conducted by CASEL that is designed to demonstrate the concept of school-wide SEL and test its effectiveness for enhancing student outcomes. We introduce the School Theory of Action (ToA) that acts as a blueprint for systemic SEL offering guidelines for activities to establish and maintain a system of implementation support for school-wide SEL. We also briefly describe the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) (Kendziora, Osher, & Weissberg, 2015), a larger initiative focused on systemic SEL within educational systems, which is the context in which the school-wide project is taking place.

A theory of action for school-wide SEL

Two main problems in intervention and prevention research are (a) that few evidence-based interventions are successfully translated into practice, integrated and sustained over time, and (b) that the infrastructure and capacity to support a systems-wide implementation of evidence-based practices is often missing (Spoth et al., 2013). Unfortunately, because of the lack of an adequate infrastructure, populations that could benefit from interventions are often not receiving them and moving toward population-level implementation of evidence-based interventions seems a distant reality (Spoth et al., 2013). Addressing this concern, CASEL has developed (and is continuously expanding) an infrastructure for SEL planning and implementation that includes guiding tools and resources that help create systemic support for SEL. Only when implemented systemically can SEL be the organising framework for educational practice that goes beyond a focus on just academic outcomes to include a full range of cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes, reaching whole populations of children at the same time (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Among the resources developed by CASEL is the School ToA that serves as a blueprint for achieving school-wide SEL (Meyers et al., 2015). The School ToA directly informs educational practice by providing guidelines and activities that staff can engage in at the school level to promote and integrate high-quality SEL in their building. Furthermore, the School ToA identifies the required support and input by the organising school districts in order to ensure high-quality and sustainable SEL programming at the school level. The School ToA outlines six key activities that help move schools towards systemic SEL:

- 1) *A shared vision for SEL is established among all stakeholders within a school.* Effective school leaders provide their staff with a vision for practice that is clear and compelling (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Fullan, 2007). School-wide SEL programming is most successful and effective when all major stakeholders from the school community (i.e. teachers, staff, students, parents and other members of the school

community) help define what social and emotional competence means for their students, and develop a plan to achieve these outcomes based on the school's own priorities and building on their own strengths. Members of the school community should be aware of this vision, and the leaders of the school should model the attitudes and behaviours they hope to see in staff and students.

- 2) *The needs and available resources for school-wide SEL implementation are assessed.* Once the vision for school-wide SEL is in place, it is important for schools to take stock in already established activities that support the development of student SEL, as a way to assess existing needs and resources (Mart et al., 2015). Most schools are already implementing some strategies to support students' social and emotional development, and these strategies can serve as important points of connection. This information is essential for developing a long-term plan for school-wide SEL because it informs the goals and priorities that are established, and highlights possible areas where SEL can be further integrated throughout the school community. The needs and resources assessment should be comprehensive and examine what is taking place and what is needed at the classroom, school, family and community levels represented in Figure 1, so that all of the school's activities can be coordinated and aligned with SEL.
- 3) *Ongoing and embedded professional learning in SEL instruction is provided.* One of the most important factors related to student outcomes is the quality of instruction provided by teachers (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2005). Therefore, a major focus of most schools is to provide ongoing professional learning to staff. As described earlier in this chapter, the process of SEL is embedded within relationships between students and teachers, among staff, and between students and their peers. Because of this, schools interested in promoting school-wide SEL should provide professional learning for all members of the school. This entails building awareness among staff about what SEL is, as well as its importance and role in education. It also includes providing professional learning that addresses specific instructional practices that prioritise social and emotional development within learning environments and explicitly teach social and emotional skills to students.
- 4) *Evidence-based SEL programming is adopted and incorporated into the schools' educational practices.* The evidence-base for SEL programmes has grown significantly in the last decade (Durlak et al., 2011; January et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008; Sklad et al., 2012). State and federal policies supporting the use of evidence-based approaches have also increased as part of the educational accountability movement. Ideally when schools identify an SEL programming need they will adopt an evidence-based strategy to address it. There are several whole-school approaches to SEL that are classroom-based and also include further components targeting school-level outcomes, such as climate building and partnerships with families and community agencies. Evidence-based programmes are an important component of school-wide SEL because when implemented well they increase the likelihood that schools will achieve positive impacts on student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).
- 5) *SEL is integrated into everyday practices at school.* School-wide SEL is most effective and likely to be sustained when it is integrated into the core functioning of the school (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). When integration is successful, SEL is linked to academics, promoted in all social interactions, reinforced by daily routines and

school structures, incorporated into policies and aligned with the school's mission for its students. High-quality SEL integration provides a common language and set of expectations that students, educators and school staff can use when interacting with each other. It also facilitates the coordination of universal and targeted supports for students, creating synergy for student interventions. The primary outcome of SEL integration is a positive school climate and comprehensive programming that is delivered sequentially across grade levels and across setting levels.

- 6) *Cycles of inquiry are conducted to ensure continuous improvement.* Continuous improvement is critical to ensure that practices remain at a high level of quality and are aligned with the school's and staff's needs (Hodges & Wotring, 2004). One way to promote continuous improvement is through the use of a cycle of inquiry. A cycle of inquiry is a reflection process that is guided by a series of questions that help school leaders create goals and identify the actions needed to achieve these goals. The inquiry process is an ongoing effort to enhance learning in the school community by identifying, addressing and regularly revisiting important questions and issues (Copland, 2003). It facilitates continuous improvement when it is used to reflect on process data collected to monitor SEL implementation, and on outcome data monitoring student social-emotional competence, academic achievement and behavioural functioning. Outcome indicators for school-wide SEL can also include comprehensive assessments of classroom and school climate since these environments support student SEL development.

It should be noted that CASEL strongly recommends that working through the School ToA is a team-based process. Therefore, it is crucial that school administrators identify and engage a core group of stakeholders early on to form a team that will lead school-wide SEL. The team's role is to inform, prepare and support others who help implement school-wide SEL. The structure of the SEL team may vary from one school to another, and a critical choice point is whether to create a new team or assign the responsibilities for SEL to an existing group. For example, while one school may see a benefit in creating a new team to serve as a dedicated advocacy group for SEL, another school may choose to designate a committee focusing on school climate, school improvement or curriculum development (Meyers et al., 2015).

The six key activities and guidelines that provide the foundation for school-wide SEL implementation are most likely to be established successfully if the district is providing systemic support for SEL as illustrated in Figure 1. When the required systemic support is provided, the school-wide activities and guidelines can yield the positive school-wide outcomes that include: a shared vision for SEL, a successful implementation plan for SEL that includes evidence-based programming, qualified staff who support and drive SEL implementation, community and family partnerships that extend school-based SEL activities, evidence and documentation of the programming's impact, a positive school climate, and ultimately the improvement of social, emotional and academic competence in all students.

After developing the School ToA, informed by theory and research of SEL programming and approaches to school reform, CASEL is currently moving one step further to putting the School ToA into practice in several schools in the United States by testing its effectiveness within a larger umbrella project known as the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI).

The Collaborating Districts Initiative: demonstrating systemic SEL in practice

The Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) began in 2010. It is a multi-year, multi-site collaboration launched by CASEL in partnership with NoVo Foundation, the American Institutes of Research (AIR), and eight large school districts in the United States (Anchorage, Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, Washoe County). The three main goals of the CDI are (a) building systemic support for SEL in each partnering school district to improve social, emotional and academic outcomes for students, (b) identifying ways in which districts can build on their own unique strengths to effectively build a sustainable system of support for SEL, and (c) evaluating the effectiveness of systemic support for SEL empirically (Kendziora et al., 2015).

The CDI involves CASEL consultants supporting and guiding the partnering districts by providing consultation to the leadership, direct professional development, technical assistance, and tools that support developing and implementing long-term plans for high-quality SEL in schools. CASEL also facilitates a cross-district dialogue among the partnering districts that encourages district leaders to learn from one another, and enables them to engage in collaborative problem-solving in the SEL implementation process. Among other goals, the CDI provides an opportunity for CASEL to work with its district partners to demonstrate the value of a school-wide approach to SEL, and to empirically evaluate the School ToA.

An evaluation of the School ToA

CASEL is partnering with Chicago Public Schools, Pennsylvania State University, and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) to experimentally test the effectiveness of the school ToA. The Comprehensive Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional Learning (CPSEL) Project includes 28 schools that are all implementing the PATHS Curriculum, an evidence-based SEL programme (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007) in grades K–3 (ages 5 to 8) over the course of two years. Half of the schools are randomised to conduct PATHS following a traditional implementation model while the other half of the schools are implementing CASEL's school-wide approach. In these buildings, the School ToA is put into practice by an SEL Leadership Team. This team meets monthly and is supported by a CASEL coach who attends the leadership team meetings, meets with members of the administration and key stakeholders in the building, and provides direct professional development to the leadership team and school staff.

The American Institutes for Research is serving as an independent evaluator of the CPSEL Project. They are collecting data of first and second graders over time (i.e. teacher ratings of social and emotional skills, behavioural adjustment and academic performance) along with staff perceptions of school climate and ratings of schools' SEL practices. The evaluation will examine whether implementing school-wide SEL plus PATHS yields enhanced positive student and school climate outcomes over and above implementing PATHS without the additional systemic support through the ToA.

In summary, the School ToA involves creating a theory- and research-based practical blueprint for schools that guides and supports educators through the process of becoming a school that implements SEL systemically. The school-wide implementation of SEL promises to reach all students in a consistent and continuous manner, and strategically fosters students' positive social, emotional and academic outcomes, and a school culture,

school norms and school practices that integrate and prioritise SEL for staff, teachers and students. An empirical evaluation of the School ToA is currently under way at CASEL and will reveal whether the systemic support offered through the school ToA significantly relates to improved student and school outcomes.

Summary and concluding remarks

The past decade has seen a strong momentum towards incorporating SEL into teaching practices with students in preschool to high school (Humphrey, 2013). This trend has emerged from a need to address the high occurrence of social, emotional, mental and behavioural problems among students in today's society (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2013) as well as to build protective factors that increase children's well-being and capacity to learn. This movement is supported by a growing scientific basis that has established a link between SEL interventions and improvements in social and academic competences (Durlak et al., 2011; January et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Here, we introduced the concept of SEL, its importance in the context of education, and how SEL can be implemented effectively through a systemic and school-wide approach.

We argued that a school-wide approach that includes all staff, teachers and students is a promising strategy to systematically infuse the day-to-day practices at school with SEL activities and strategies (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Meyers et al., 2015). By incorporating SEL through an overarching school-wide approach, two important aspects of implementation – consistency and continuity – can be achieved (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Building a continuous and consistent language, practice and vision around SEL involves coordinated school–family–community programming to extend school-based SEL into the broader environmental contexts that shape students' development. School-wide SEL approaches require substantial strategic planning and support. In fact, the larger educational systems in which schools are embedded (e.g. school districts as the organising units of schools in the United States) as well as supportive federal and state policies are essential in establishing a sustainable and high quality system of school-wide SEL (Mart et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015). CASEL, as a leading organisation in the field of SEL in education, currently works with researchers and practitioners in implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of school-wide SEL. Our goal is that the School ToA will provide a practical blueprint that can be used by schools to systematically change their educational practices incorporating school-wide SEL.

Barriers and resistance in implementing school-wide SEL also need to be considered. Inadequate funding for SEL approaches is often a key concern for schools. Financing SEL needs to be addressed within the larger organising units of schools (i.e. federal, state/province, district/Local Authorities) in the context of prioritising students' social-emotional development (Price, 2015). Supporting SEL requires allocating resources for school-wide SEL approaches – including providing professional development for teachers – and making SEL a priority along with their academic development. Furthermore, many educators feel pressured to address multiple competing priorities at the same time (e.g. teaching the school curriculum, securing students' academic achievement, supporting students with special needs) and might perceive the responsibility of incorporating SEL in the classroom as an additional burden on their high workload. While this perception needs to be acknowledged, it is important to understand that, based on previous findings, enhancing SEL is beneficial

for students' social, emotional and behavioural skills, as well as for academic achievement (e.g. Durlak et al., 2011). Hence, using SEL approaches can be seen as a way to address academic achievement in the school context, rather than a responsibility that takes time away from learning. In addition, integrative approaches to SEL allow teachers to incorporate SEL into their regular subject-specific content of the curriculum rather than viewing it as an add-on (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In moving to a school-wide model of SEL implementation, it is critical to identify, recognise and acknowledge the perceived barriers presented by stakeholders, and to address them by providing the required support.

In conclusion, school-wide SEL is an ambitious and important approach that brings us one step further in successfully accomplishing the mission that many researchers, scholars and practitioners in the field of SEL share: Making SEL a fundamental part of every child's education by establishing evidence-based SEL as an essential part of preschool through to high school education. Even though much progress has been made in recognising the need for and addressing social and emotional competences in schools, a systematic and sustainable approach to SEL that is research-based and supported by main stakeholders at all organising levels in education is now needed to ensure that all children gain the social and emotional competences they need to succeed in life.

Note

1. In the context of the United Kingdom (UK), schools are organised within Local Authorities (LAs); some of the resources for SEL are allocated to schools through their LA and some resources are given to schools directly.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the by the U.S. Department of Education (i3 PRU411C130091). The authors would also like to thank the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, 1440 Foundation, NoVo Foundation, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their support of CASEL's efforts to advance SEL research, practice and policy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. Dr Domitrovich is an author on the PATHS Curriculum and has a royalty agreement with Channing-Bete, Inc. This has been reviewed and managed by Penn State's Individual Conflict of Interest Committee.

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