

Social Emotional Learning: Behind the Buzz(word)

By Nicole Laborte, University of North Texas, Graduate Student

A quick Google search will lead to numerous accounts and data reports revealing the exponential increase of anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns among our K-12 students. Possible causes include the rise of social media, increased connectivity among students, decreasing stigma towards mental health problems, etc. Regardless of the root cause, students are struggling. As a music educator, I have experienced such incredible frustration witnessing the educational system repeatedly fail to truly address and meet the social and emotional needs of the students I serve. In theory, every student has access to school counselors and other structured interventions. I quickly discovered that those of us engaging and building relationships daily with students were given the bulk of the responsibility to recognize students in crisis and initiate the process of getting them the help they need.

Over time, I found myself questioning if there was something I could do on a broader scale as an educator to better establish an environment that allowed students the space to process and express their emotions in a potentially more healthy, healing, and cathartic way. It was during this search that I encountered Social Emotional Learning (SEL), specifically in an ensemble context that would be suitable to explore with my students. Burroughs & Barkauskas (2017) describe SEL as “the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors” (p. 220).

Despite my best efforts to build a culture of self-regulation and being present within my classroom through meditation and self-reflection, I encountered an unexpected roadblock. This

roadblock came during my own efforts to practice what I preached. About a month into my journey into mindfulness practice, I found myself suddenly panicking every time I tried to follow a guided meditation. I felt unable to breathe, unable to feel any connection to my body. My mind was suffocating under the flood of everything I was trying to let go of in my efforts to "empty my mind".

I was extremely thankful that this roadblock occurred in the presence of my licensed therapist, not while teaching my middle schoolers. I realized my understanding of SEL skills and knowledge just barely broached the surface of childhood SE development and trauma response. I chided myself for deciding to implement it without a deeper understanding. I, like many other educators, was seduced by the SEL buzz. This deep dive intends to provide a more critical challenge to the stakeholders who are being asked to implement SEL curriculum within their schools. Above all else, educators have a responsibility to our students to ensure that we do no harm in our attempts to support their physical and mental well-being.

Detrimental Therapeutic Education

SEL finds its origins in an outdated developmental state theory that is criticized heavily for being “culturally hegemonic and sexist while creating unnecessary and unhelpful distances between adults and children” (Stearns, 2016, p. 334). The hegemonic cultural norms of SEL are established by focusing on reducing behaviors deemed problematic through the lens of the teacher, not from a strengths-based or student-centered approach (Stearns, 2016). Instead of celebrating and encouraging “meaningful, productive, political, or any number of possibilities” of views and interactions from students, SEL practice gives the illusion of allowing for choice when in fact the locus of control is in the hands of the adults determining what is acceptable in

any moment, at any time (p. 335). In other words, “SEL becomes an attempt to dictate who [students] become,” not who they innately are (McBride, 2019, p. 198).

Wood (2020) goes further to describe SEL as a “persistent and targeted devaluation of emotions in educational policy and practice” (p. 161). At the time of this writing, all fifty states in America have laws and policies mandating schools to teach SEL skills to meet their standards by grade level (McBride, 2019). Unfortunately, with policy comes accountability. McBride fears that SEL may soon be “graded” with “standardized quantitative testing, just like academic attainment,” leading to the potential redirection of resources to schools with low SEL attainment or “deprive such schools of resources to mandate compliance”. By allowing SEL to be weaponized through increased enforcement and weaponizing standardized testing to adjudicate implementation success, we imply that there will be “consequences for students, families, educators, and schools” (McBride, 2019).

Ethical Competencies and SEL

SEL has an ethical grey area as to what defines social and emotional literacy competency. Ethical social and emotional literacy is “the ability to decode others and ourselves and to use this information to solve real social-emotional problems” (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017, p. 222). SEL advocates assume that students who have developed these skills will be more caring, cooperative, and helpful when interacting and engaging with others (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). However, students are just as likely to use these decoding skills to manipulate others for their means (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). It cannot be implicitly assumed that students are automatically ethically literate because of SE literacy development.

Most SEL programs also neglect to account for the possible schism between existing early childhood motivation to respond to what is perceived as social versus moral transgressions

(Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Moral transgressions are value-centered, often instilled in children by immediate family members while they engage in many social contexts outside of their homes. Moral transgressions usually result in greater punishment because they are universally recognized and obeyed. In contrast, social transgressions are more attitudinal and extremely contingent on the “norms, rules, and expectations of authority figures within a specific social setting” (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). By failing to account for potential motivations of response towards perceived social and moral transgressions, SEL may lead to a heteronomous ethical orientation of “blind obedience to authority, open or private rebellion of moral rules, and/or self-regulation guided by impulse” instead of a more “autonomously moral individual, [capable] of self-regulation and personal conviction” (p. 226). Ideally, existing SEL programs should be revised to include a more holistic approach to educating students, allowing them to develop both SEL skills and ethical competencies.

Duality of Life

Most SEL curriculums fail to acknowledge the inherent duality of life where perceived positive and negative emotions can coexist to be explored and examined. SEL often sterilizes negative emotions to create a school environment free from discomfort, that promotes a disconcerting culture of hegemonic positivity (Stearns, 2016). Hegemonic positivity is defined as positivity being the accepted or ruling emotion within a social context, or in this case, within a school setting. In the context of SEL, this hegemonic positivity reinforces meritocracy within the educational system by falsely synthesizing that only those free from negative emotions will be successful in the real world (Stearns, 2016).

Stearns (2016) challenges that hegemonic positivity in SEL exists because of the “tremendous potential power of negative emotion, which can function aesthetically as a form of

protest against cultural norms that repetitively alienate all but a select few” (p. 339). If this negative emotion is allowed to fester, the collective could choose to rebel against this forced alienation of emotional compliance and demand change (p. 339). By accepting hegemonic positivity as its norm, SEL blatantly ignores the “complex, intangible, and unknowledgeable nature of human emotion and learning” (p. 340).

Monoculture and Autonomy

In addition to allowing space for hegemonic positivity, SEL has become an opportunity to weaponize largely Western-denominated hegemonic cultural values of controlled emotion and compliance (Wood, 2020). Emotional control and compliance become synonymous with behavior management and intervention strategies, to target and quell any response outside of the cultural norms of the school environment (McBride, 2019; Wood, 2020). Given the subjective nature of what defines emotional control, the suggested behavior management and intervention strategies become “potentially problematic because of the wide latitude it can give decision-makers to level consequences on the grounds of illegible or unshared notions of desirable social behavior” (McBride, 2019, p. 214). This vagueness in enforcement conceptualizes SEL standards as “learned knowledge and skills instead of values, beliefs, and dimensions of identity” instilled by an individual’s unique worldview and experience “(p. 214).

The implications of this “monoculture” result in disproportionate implementation and false assumptions towards populations that already are marginalized within educational systems – children with low socioeconomic status and/or students from minority ethnic backgrounds (McBride, 2019; Woods, 2020). Common teacher assumptions may lead to more labeling of these students as likely to have behavior issues, viewed as needing IEP/special education

services, be unable to learn and develop appropriate SEL skills, lack emotional intelligence, and seen as “Other” in comparison to their peers (McBride, 2019; Woods, 2020).

This “Othering” of children is not limited to just students; families of low socioeconomic and/or minority-ethnic backgrounds are “Othered” alongside their children (Woods, 2020). This “Othering” of students and their families through environmental monoculture has the potential to eliminate individual autonomy over their norms, values, and behaviors by allowing the state to define what constitutes a good life (McBride, 2019). SEL ignores this parental autonomy with its “one-size fits all” socialization framework, putting the “crisis” on the families for their perceived socializing failings in their children, potentially enabling unnecessary intervention or dissolution of already vulnerable family systems (McBride, 2019). State interference should only occur if the family’s approach “does not meet the minimum level of care expected of all parents,” resulting in child abuse and/or neglect (McBride, 2019, p. 233).

Conclusion

As school districts and policymakers consider the implementation of SEL practices and curriculum within their K-12 educational systems, they must first address and question these significant shortcomings:

- 1) SEL emphasizes focusing on students' social/emotional "needs" (particularly structure and routine) to enhance academic performance through standardized testing (Stearns, 2016).
- 2) SEL fails to address the ethical grey area for children navigating social versus moral transgressions and using SEL-acquired decoding skills to manipulate others for their gain.
- 3) SEL diminishes the inherent dual nature of life in favor of prescribing hegemonic positivity with no room for perceived negative emotions.

- 4) SEL adheres to predominantly Westernized cultural values of controlled emotion and compliance, creating opportunities for continued marginalization of students and families viewed as "Other".

Instead of using SEL as a "one-size fits all" solution to ensure measurable social/emotional skills in all children through installation within a school's culture and environment, stakeholders should also consider existing research-based practices and interventions already well established within the communities of mental health counselors and clinicians (Ecclestone & Rawdin, 2016). We have the potential to cause great harm if we fail to recognize the individual uniqueness of each child in our efforts to guarantee society's definition of success.

References

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