

Chapter 15

Translating Research Knowledge into Effective School Practice in the Field of Social and Emotional Learning

Ann Lendrum

University of Manchester, UK

Neil Humphrey

University of Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of developing intra- and inter-personal competencies in children and young people, typically in school settings. It has become a major orthodoxy in education in recent years. This chapter explores the implications of the accumulated body of research in SEL for developing effective educational practice in this area. Drawing upon an international literature base, coverage includes what research tells us about the importance of SEL, the role of schools in promoting it, how this process works to influence key proximal and distal outcomes, the kinds of approaches and strategies that have been shown to be effective, and the centrality of different aspects of (and factors affecting) implementation. It culminates with an extended vignette (following Lendrum, Humphrey, Kalambouka, & Wigelsworth, 2009), the intention of which is to demonstrate what SEL might look like in a school in which research knowledge is routinely used to inform practice.

INTRODUCTION

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing intra- and inter-personal skills in

children and young people, typically in school settings. These include *self-awareness* (e.g., recognising our own emotions and thoughts and how they influence our behaviour), *self-management* (e.g., being able to regulate these emotions effectively according to situational demands), *social awareness* (e.g., being able to consider the perspective

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of others), *relationship skills* (e.g., listening, co-operating, offering help when needed) and *responsible decision-making* (e.g., making ethical and safe choices about our personal behaviour) (see www.casel.org).

SEL skills have great utility. They help children to navigate the social world and increase resilience to bullying and victimisation, violence and a wide range of other negative processes and outcomes (Sklad et al., 2012). Crucially, SEL skills may also enable young people to become more effective learners (Durlak et al., 2011). Learning is a social process and it therefore stands to reason that improved social and emotional competence will facilitate academic success. Indeed, research consistently demonstrates that academic and social-emotional skills are deeply interconnected (see, for example, Qualter et al., 2012). SEL skills may be acquired both implicitly and explicitly, through socialisation processes and instructional practices respectively (Humphrey, 2013).

Schools play a central role in SEL. They have extremely broad reach, provide a key influence in children's lives, and are often a central hub in the wider community. SEL may be promoted in schools through specific programs and interventions and/or strategies and approaches. In terms of the specific programs, distinctions can be made in terms of *reach* (universal, targeted, or indicated levels of intervention)¹, *component structure* (focusing on the delivery of a taught curriculum, changing aspects of the school environment or ethos, working with parents and/or the wider community, or some combination of these) and *prescriptiveness* (emphasising adherence to a single model of implementation or promoting flexibility and local adaptation) (Humphrey, 2013). With regard to strategies and approaches, the teaching and reinforcement of SEL skills in daily interactions and practices with students can be achieved successfully through, for example, the use of specific routines (e.g., emotion regulation strategies), on-going training and support for all staff (e.g., approaches to dealing with student

outbursts), support for adult skills and wellbeing (e.g., effective ways to manage stress), and integration of SEL standards (e.g., to encourage ongoing assessment and monitoring) (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

What Do SEL Programs Look Like?

A plethora of programs (at least 240 over a decade ago, CASEL, 2003; the number in existence at this writing must be in the thousands) have been developed to promote SEL and available space does not permit us to provide comprehensive coverage. For this, the reader is referred to the guides available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au and www.casel.org. Instead, we provide two contrasting examples, designed to showcase the heterogeneity across SEL interventions. The first of these is the *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)* curriculum. PATHS aims to help children to manage their behaviour, understand their emotions and work well with others. It is a universal intervention for all children in the school class situation, and consists of a series of lessons that cover topics such as identifying and labelling feelings, controlling impulses, reducing stress and understanding other people's perspectives. The full PATHS curriculum contains lessons for children aged 4-11.

The main component of PATHS is the explicitly *taught* curriculum. The program utilises a 'spiral' curriculum model, whereby (i) topics and concepts are revisited; (ii) units and lessons are developmentally sequenced; (iii) new learning is linked to previous learning; and (iv) the competence of learners increases with each successive visit to a topic or concept. The taught curriculum is supplemented by generalisation activities and techniques that support the application of new skills during the course of the school day. All members of the school staff are encouraged to make use of *teachable moments* to help children understand how and when they might use these strategies and skills. Finally, parent materials, such

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