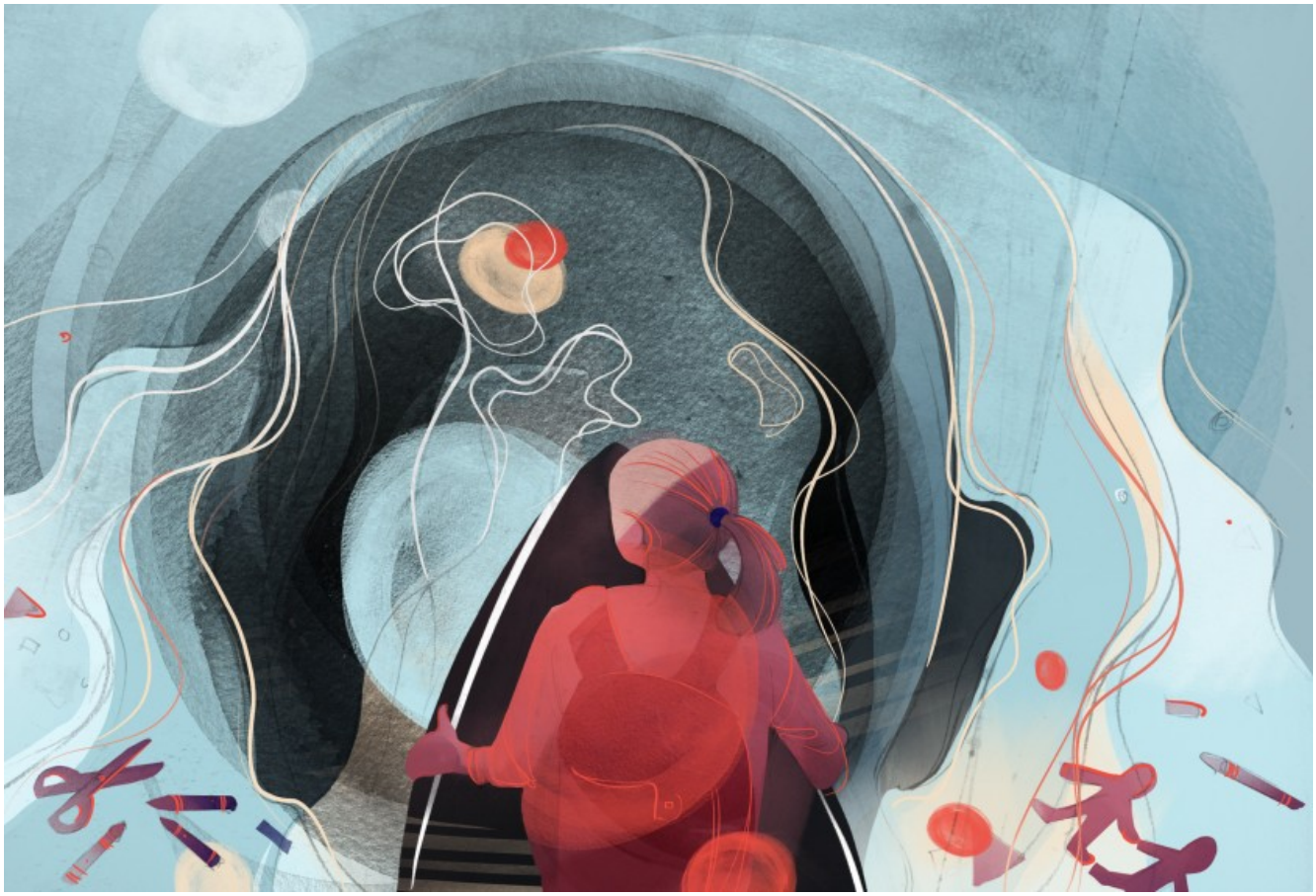
The SEL Skills That May Matter Most for Academic Success: Curiosity and Persistence



Want students to succeed in math and reading? Nurture their curiosity and persistence.

Across 11 countries, those two skills are the most closely linked to better academic performance for both 10- and 15-year-olds, according to the first international survey of social-emotional skills. Rather than ranking countries' average social-emotional performance, the study analyzed the way social-emotional skills affected students' performance. Students in a wide array of educational systems and learning contexts still showed that the development of social skills ranging from trust and creativity to assertiveness could boost students' performance in core academic subjects.

"Some people still see this as opposing ends of the spectrum, you have the academic development and the social-emotional development. And some even think, well, if you focus too much on social-emotional skills, you take something away, [such as] mathematics academic time," said Andreas Schleicher, the director for education at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which conducted the study. "Actually what our research shows is that they are two sides of the same coin, and actually quite closely connected."

The OECD, which administers the global Program for International Student Assessment, analyzed the social-emotional development of more than 3,000 students from large cities in 11 countries, including Houston in the United States, as well as Helsinki, Finland; Suzhou, China; and Moscow, Russia.

The group looked at five key areas:

- Task performance (such as persistence, and self-control),
- Emotional regulation (such as optimism and reaction to stress),
- Collaboration (like empathy and trust),
- Open-mindedness (such as tolerance, curiosity, and creativity), and
- Engagement with others (such as assertiveness and sociability).

The OECD found curiosity and persistence were the strongest predictors of academic success in both math and reading for both children and teenagers, but other skills played important roles. For example, creativity was more closely connected with math progress than art progress for teenagers.

The study focused on urban students, as a "localized ecosystem" of students, parents, teachers, and education systems. "This is a whole society enterprise, and you can see how much the quality of relationships matter," he said.

Teenagers see lower SEL skills

One of the most surprising findings to the OECD was that across countries and socioeconomic backgrounds, 15-year-olds showed lower social-emotional skills than 10-year-olds did.

Surveys from students, teachers, and parents all showed lower social skills among teenagers, above and beyond normal adolescent self-consciousness. The skills gap was particularly large for things like optimism, trust, energy and sociability, and the OECD found girls had bigger drops than boys across most of the skills.

"Ask yourself, what are we doing as parents, as schools, as education systems to help young people through this difficult period of adolescence. This is a finding that I don't think many educators are aware of. It's something that I think we should take to heart, that there is a period in their lives where we should redouble our efforts," Schleicher said.

That is particularly crucial at a time when many teenagers have faced social isolation and anxiety from the ongoing pandemic. "We know that the experience of trauma impacts development and learning and a host of other outcomes," Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, a psychology chair of social and emotional learning at the University of Chicago. "I don't think we can really think about outcomes for young people without a trauma lens ... and how we as a society nurture and work to reduce the impact of trauma on young people."
Yet educators point out that social-emotional learning programs, which in the United States are often targeted to younger students, can be a poor fit for more world-weary adolescents.