

An update on social and emotional learning outcome research

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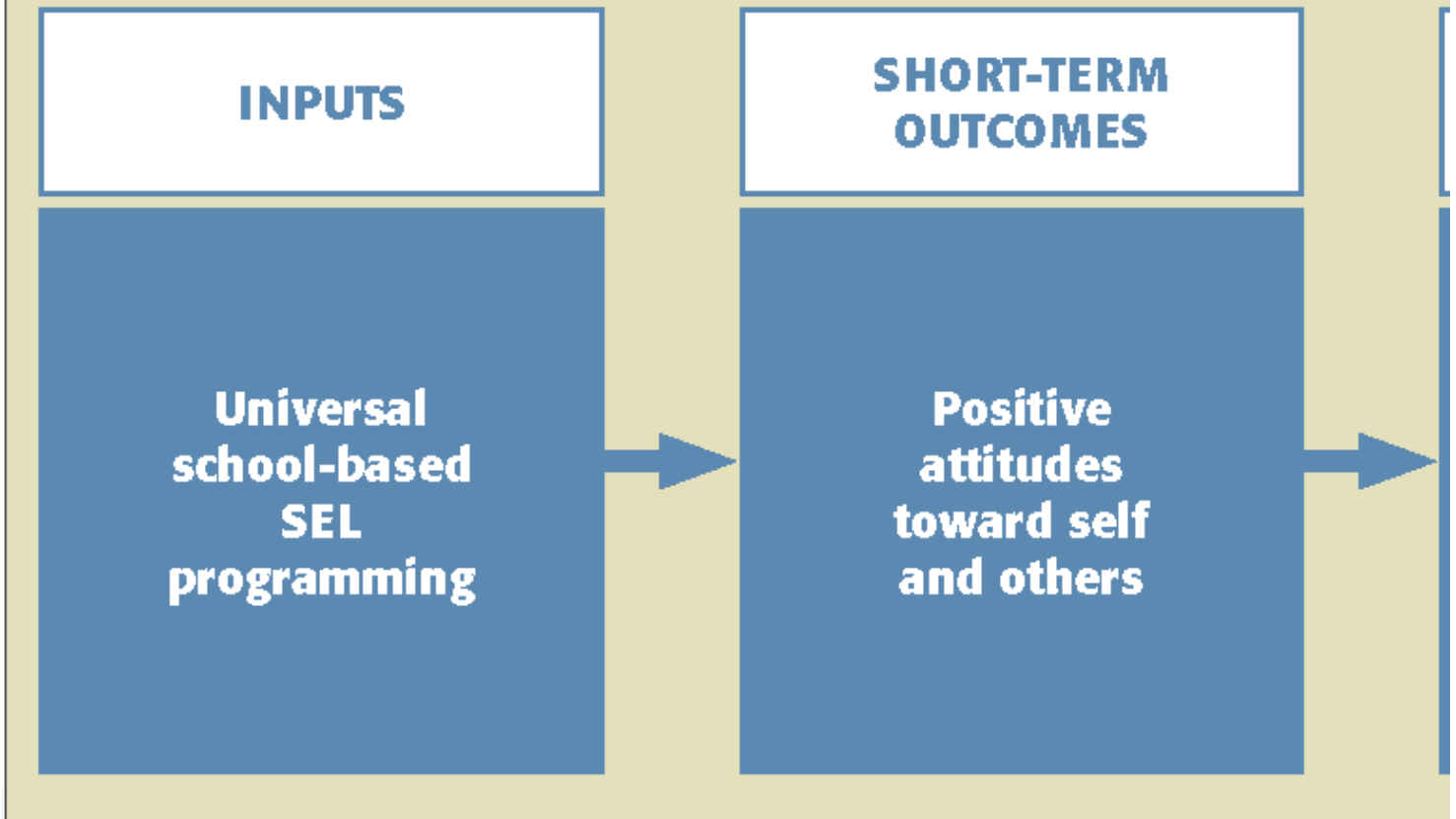
An examination of four meta-analyses of SEL programs found multiple positive outcomes in the students.

In recent years, it has become commonplace among American educators to argue that if schools aim to prepare students for a complex and diverse world, then they must provide instruction in more than just academic content and mathematics, science, social studies, and other subject areas). Social and emotional learning (SEL), too, is essential for student success in and out of school, and it merits careful, sustained attention throughout K-12 education (Bridgette Durlak, Weissberg et al., 2015).

Already, thousands of schools within and outside the United States have implemented SEL programs (Casciaro, 2013), and many U.S. state departments of education have issued, or are in the process of issuing, standards for specific SEL skills at each grade level (Dusenbury et al., 2015). So, too, have many federal, state, and

FIGURE 1.

Social and emotional learning outcomes as a long-term process



However, educators and policy makers may wonder whether researchers have documented the effectiveness about these positive outcomes. To answer this question, we've examined four large-scale meta-analyses of school-based SEL programs. (A meta-analysis is a statistical method of synthesizing research findings on the effectiveness of a given program; it's a way of pooling together all of the available research findings and conducting a statistical assessment.) The sum total of the existing evidence, we found, strongly suggests that SEL programs do have a positive impact on participating students.

Results from four meta-analyses

The first meta-analysis (which has received considerable attention from educators, policy makers, and researchers) examined the findings from studies of 213 school-based, universal SEL programs, including outcomes data for more than 10 million students from kindergarten through high school (Durlak et al., 2011). Two major findings stood out:

- Compared to control students, students participating in SEL programs showed significantly more enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, and academic performance, and significantly less internalizing and emotional distress.
- The higher academic performance of SEL program participants translated into an 11 percentile-point increase in academic achievement. SEL programs tend to bolster, rather than detract from, students' academic success.

This review also indicated that SEL programs managed by teachers and other school staff consistently

- **Positive social behaviors**, such as getting along with others, helping others, showing concern for solving, peace building, and cooperation.
- **Conduct problems**, including disruptive classroom behavior, fighting, hurting others, verbal aggressive delinquent acts.
- **Emotional distress**, such as depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal.
- **Academic performance**, including reading and math achievement, standardized test scores, school from teacher ratings.

At the same time, while all four meta-analyses touched on these six domains, and while they reached similar conclusions, they differed in one respect: Two of them focused on the short-term effects of SEL programs, synthesizing data from reports collected shortly after students concluded a program (Durlak et al., 2011; Wiglesworth et al., 2016) and two focused on longer-term effects, using data (from 129 different reports) collected at various follow-up periods — McLeod et al. (2017) reviewed 75 studies, covering 2008 and earlier, that assessed outcomes at least seven months after the program; Rebecca Taylor and colleagues (2017) reviewed studies conducted through 2014, with follow-up periods ranging from 12 months to 10 years (Table 1 presents some of the main features of these two pairs of reviews.)

TABLE 1.
Characteristics of four meta-analyses of SEL program effects

Main focus of evaluation	Results at post		
	Durlak et al., 2011	Wiglesworth et al., 2016	Skinner et al., 2017
Authors	Durlak et al., 2011	Wiglesworth et al., 2016	Skinner et al., 2017
# Studies/interventions	213	89	75
# Students	270,034	n/r	Avg. N = 1,000 per study
Time period	1955-2007	1995-2013	1995-2014
% RCT	47	64	56
% outside U.S.	13	n/r	n/r
% outside North America	n/r	n/r	21
% "away"	n/r	20†	n/r

Notes: n/r = not reported. RCT = randomized control trial. †Most "home" studies (i.e., not away) were conducted in the U.S. and the percentage is not reported.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the findings focusing on short-term outcomes (referred to as "post," for data

TABLE 2.

Comparison of post-intervention outcomes for two meta-analyses

Author(s)		Outcomes				Cond probl
		SEL skills	Attitudes	Positive social behaviors		
Durlak et al., 2011	ES	.57*	.23*	.24*	.2	
	CI	.48-.67	.16-.30	.16-.32	.16-	
	N	68	106	86	1	
Wiglesworth et al., 2016	ES	.53*	.17	.33*	.2	
	CI	.32-.75	.07-.28	.24-.42	.20-	
	N	24	9	39		

Notes: * $p < .05$. ES = effect size. CI = confidence interval. N = # of studies.

TABLE 3.

Comparison of follow-up outcomes for two meta-analyses of SEL

Author(s)		Outcomes				Cond probl
		SEL skills	Attitudes	Positive social behaviors		
Sklad et al., 2012	ES	.07*	.07*	.12*	.2	
	CI	.04-.09	.03-.10	.06-.18	.10-	
	N	15	12	7		
Taylor et al., 2017	ES	.23*	.13*	.13*	.1	
	CI	.15-.31	.05-.21	.05-.21	.07-	
	N	29	26	28		

Notes: * $p < .05$. ES = effect size. CI = confidence interval. N = # of studies.

Two of the follow-up findings are particularly notable, though. First, the follow-up effects are quite strong in the area of academic achievement. The results in this area (mean effects of 0.26 and 0.33), represent an 11 percentile-point gain in achievement, over the long term, for students who participated in SEL programs relative to control groups. In other words, SEL programs appear to have as great a long-term impact on academic growth as has been found in other studies that support academic learning (Hill et al., 2008). Second, the study by Taylor and colleagues (2017) found that the long-term gains in SEL skills were the strength of their short-term SEL gains. That is, where students saw gains in emotional skills, the learning tended to be relatively sticky, fading to a lesser degree over time.