

Another education war? The coming debates over social and emotional learning

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Responding to Timothy Shriver and Roger Weissberg’s article in the April 2020 Kappan, Yong Zhao argues that there’s much less consensus around social and emotional learning than supporters would like to believe.

“After two decades of education debates that produced deep passions and deeper divisions, we have a chance for a fresh start,” opens a report by the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (NCSEAD, 2019, p. 5). “[F]amiliar arguments over national standards and the definition of accountability are not as relevant as they once were,” the report continues. Indeed, disputes about standards and testing were rare among the more than 200

scientists, education researchers, educators, policy makers, parents, and students who participated in the commission’s two-year initiative. Rather, they came to a “remarkable consensus” over the need for schools to prioritize not just the academic performance of America’s children but also their social and emotional development.

Undoubtedly, enthusiasm about social and emotional learning (SEL) has grown dramatically since the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the federal education law that allows states to use one nonacademic measure for accountability, in addition to the required academic measures. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), one of the leading SEL organizations, has seized the moment and launched initiatives to push states and districts to adopt SEL. Since 2016, participation has grown “from eight states to more than 30 states and one U.S. territory, collectively representing more than 11,850 school districts, 67,000 schools, 2 million teachers and 35 million students, preschool to high school” (CASEL, 2019a). Today, all 50 U.S. states have SEL standards/competencies for preschool, 11 states have extended preschool standards to early elementary, and 18 states have standards for K-12. There is tremendous political will to bring SEL to schools, as evidenced by the more than 200 pieces of legislation referencing SEL introduced in 2019 alone (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020).

Nonetheless, I suspect that the NCSEAD’s description of a “remarkable consensus” is far too optimistic. For all its success, the SEL movement has faced a wave of attacks over the last few years, and those attacks don’t seem to be letting up. Critics have derided SEL as, for example, a “nonacademic common core” (Gorman, 2016); “the latest big education fad” (Robbins, 2016); a terrifying experiment in social engineering (Eden, 2019), and an “Orwellian idea” (Effrem, 2017). Writing in *Education Week*, Chester Finn (2017) equated SEL to the “self-esteem” movement, calling it a hoax, with roots in “faux psychology.” In a recent white paper, the Pioneer Institute urged policy makers to block SEL-related programs, warning that they could lead to the psychological manipulation of students, threats to their data privacy, “indoctrination,” and an “erosion of freedom of conscience via government-established SEL norms for the attitudes, values, and beliefs of freeborn American citizens” (Effrem & Robbins, 2019, p. 32).

As Timothy Shriver and Roger Weissberg (2020) — CASEL’s chair and vice chair — noted in last month’s *Kappan*, friendly criticism has been abundant, too. For example, Frederick Hess (2017), offering “a little free advice,” urges advocates to be clear about what SEL is, to avoid overselling the research, and to acknowledge their own ideological biases. Similarly, Finn and Hess (2019) make “[s]even suggestions for SEL advocates and funders

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as they seek to deliver on its promise and avoid its pitfalls,” and Jay Greene (2019) warns that if SEL advocates want to succeed, they must own up to their movement’s “moral and religious roots.”

However, while I’m encouraged by the reasoned and respectful tone of some recent criticism (and by the equally respectful tone of Shriver and Weissberg’s response), I don’t expect the more strident attacks on SEL to fade away. If anything, I see critics gearing up for another education war, one that could easily become as nasty, divisive, and damaging as the reading wars, the math wars, and — the mother of all education wars — the war between progressive and conservative philosophies of education (Zhao, 2018b). To prevent that war, I suspect that SEL advocates will have to reach out to more than just their friendliest critics, and they’ll have to acknowledge more of the SEL movement’s shortcomings.

Overselling SEL?

As Shriver and Weissberg (2020) acknowledge, legitimate concerns have been raised about the dangers of overhyping the value of SEL programs and policies and exaggerating the strength of SEL’s research base. To an extent, they share that concern. However, they point out, while *every* part of K-12 education is vulnerable to hype, the research base that undergirds the SEL movement and its programs is solid (Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2018). After two decades of education policy focused almost exclusively on students’ academic performance, they add, it has become widely recognized (thanks in large part to the research) that children’s social and emotional needs are just as important as their mastery of core content and skills.

Still, if some of the recent criticisms of the SEL movement have been constructive, that doesn’t take the sting out of the harsher comments that have been made, such as Finn’s (2017) earlier prediction that SEL would go the way of the self-esteem movement and other “kooky curricular enthusiasms

of the past.” It’s yet another experiment in navel-gazing, he argued. SEL “does not seem intended to build character in any traditional sense, nor is it aimed at citizenship. It’s awash in the self.” Moreover, predicted Finn, “social-emotional learning will almost surely turn out to have no real scientific foundation — just a lot of much-hyped ‘qualitative’ and ‘anecdotal’ studies that nobody could replicate via gold-standard research.”

The Pioneer Institute, too, has called SEL’s knowledge base into question. According to its recent white paper, which includes a fairly thorough review of the research literature, “[T]he certitude with which proponents, especially CASEL and [NCSEAD] express their faith in the efficacy of SEL may

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be based less on science and rigorous research than on their own hopes about what ‘ought to’ work (and perhaps their own financial interests in the outcome)” (Effrem & Robbins, 2019, p. 22). In short, there’s little reason to think that skeptics of the SEL movement will be persuaded by Shriver and Weissberg’s assertion that the evidence base is strong.

Nor will it be easy to refute those who argue that the definition of SEL remains fuzzy. For example, while Hess takes a more conciliatory tone in his most recent articles, that doesn’t make his earlier criticism go away: “[T]rying to pin SEL advocates down on precisely what’s on the table can feel like I’m questioning a wily, reluctant suspect,” he wrote in 2017. “I’ll hear that it’s about motivating students and anti-bullying and ‘inclusion’ and a recipe for higher graduation rates and ‘restorative justice’ . . . with the ‘it’ sometimes morphing in the course of a single sentence.”

On this score, I find myself siding with the critics. Shriver and Weissberg try to deflect this concern by pointing out that “some amount of ambiguity will be inevitable,” since “nobody — CASEL included — *owns* any one true definition of SEL.” Further, they say, CASEL has, in fact, done a lot over the years to clarify what “any viable SEL framework” should include and how SEL programs should be implemented.

I’m not convinced, though, that these explanations do much to address critics’ main concern, which has to do with the sheer number and variety of things that have been collected under SEL’s umbrella. As Harvard professor Martin West argues, SEL seems to be a catchall term, applied to just about anything that is “not directly measured by standardized tests,” such as grit, mindset, the 4Cs (creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration), habits of mind, and resilience (Kamenetz, 2017). And as other critics have noted, “Common terms for this set of skills include character education, personality, 21st-century skills, soft skills, and noncognitive skills, just to name a few” (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 3).

To date, the state-level SEL standards that have been adopted are based mainly on CASEL’s framework, which divides SEL into five broad areas: the development of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Greenberg et al., 2017). However, schools and districts rarely come up with a plan to address all of these needs at once. Rather, when pushed to address students’ social and emotional needs, they tend to zero in a specific program, such as Carol Dweck’s well-known approach to promoting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008) or one of the many other SEL programs on the market (Jones et al., 2017).

So, while CASEL may define SEL as a comprehensive set of five broad goals for child development, schools always seem to narrow the focus to something much more specific. One school will focus on growth mindsets, another on restorative justice, another on the prevention of bullying, and so on. That raises the question, though, does the program on growth mindset really

belong under the same umbrella as the one devoted to restorative justice or the prevention of bullying? SEL advocates have grouped them together, but they don't actually have much in common, do they?

That also raises questions about the knowledge base. Shriver and Weissberg rely on evidence from meta-analyses (Mahoney et al., 2018) to claim that SEL programs have been shown to have “a range of short- and long-term academic and behavioral benefits for K-12 students.” However, this empirical evidence is limited to a much smaller set of outcomes than CASEL's broad definition of SEL claims to encompass. For example, the available research may show positive effects of programs designed to promote growth mindsets, but it says nothing about the effects of SEL programs on creativity, entrepreneurial thinking, or other so-called 21st-century skills. Thus, it is disingenuous to make sweeping claims about the effectiveness of SEL programs on SEL writ large. To assert that the research on one kind of SEL instruction (promoting student's growth mindsets, say) tells us anything about the effectiveness of other SEL programs (such as those designed to teach creativity or entrepreneurial thinking) is as absurd as claiming that since math is an example of an academic subject area, then a school that does a good job teaching math must also be good at teaching U.S. history. I have to wonder, then, does the evidence really suggest that “SEL programs” have benefits for K-12 students, or does it suggest that *some of the particular programs* commonly (and perhaps arbitrarily) associated with SEL have some benefits for some students in some contexts? Those are very different findings, with quite different implications.

However, my primary concern doesn't have to do with the quality of the research that Shriver and Weissberg cite; it has to do with the assumption that these disparate research studies all belong to a larger *movement*.

Movements are all too common in K-12 education, and it's not hard to see why. Reformers aren't likely to generate much excitement about a handful of unrelated practices — e.g., promoting academic mindsets, creating restorative justice programs, preventing bullying, and teaching creativity. It would be silly to claim to that if your school implements a couple of these things, that will transform K-12 education. But it's a different story to say that your local restorative justice program is part of a “growing movement to put SEL at the center of the K-12 curriculum.”

Unfortunately, this idea of being part of a larger movement gives educators a false and inflated sense of accomplishment, leading them to believe that by investing in a small local initiative, they've taken meaningful action to meet students' social and emotional needs and prepare them for future success. But in fact, adopting a growth mindset program or an anti-bullying intervention is not the same as educating the whole child; neither is it the same as cultivating all the nonacademic skills (Zhao et al., 2019) or personal qualities (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015) that students will need in future years. It's just one little program.

As I've argued elsewhere (Zhao, 2018b), when educators get excited about a new movement, they often overstate its potential, describing it as though it were a panacea for all that ails the schools, a powerful wonder drug with no adverse side effects. Inevitably, though, that movement will be found to be less potent than advertised and even harmful in unforeseen ways. In response, a new movement (most likely a reincarnation of an earlier one) will rise, and so it goes. That's how the pendulum swings in education.

Indeed, the current enthusiasm for SEL can be seen as a rejection of the previous movement to improve academic outcomes via test-driven accountability and centralized and standardized curriculum and assessment. Many in education saw these policies and practices as a panacea, too (Zhao, 2009, 2012), until it became clear that they were ineffective and had all sorts of adverse side effects (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, 2008; Zhao, 2018b). If SEL continues to be described as a grand, transformative movement, then I have no doubt that it will suffer the same fate.

Ideologically driven?

Another major point of contention over SEL is whether it is ideologically driven. Advocates say no. "In fact, the basis of this approach is not ideological at all," maintains the NCSEAD report, for two reasons. First, the SEL movement is based on science: "It is rooted in the experience of teachers, parents, and students supported by the best educational research of the past few decades." Second, SEL is driven by local actors, not top-down federal mandates: "It is based on the emerging consensus of successful communities, convinced that this is the missing piece in American education. It will only expand to scale on the strength of local ownership, promoting these efforts school by school, district by district, and state by state" (NCSEAD, 2019, p. 8).

But to some critics, the SEL movement is rooted in the secular ideology of progressive education. For example, Kevin Ryan (2019), an emeritus professor of education at Boston University and founder of the Center for Character and Social Responsibility, argues: "The current popularity of [SEL] represents progressive education's greatest victory in its 100-plus-year campaign to transform our public schools, and, thus, the nature of America itself" (p. 4). He explains:

SEL advocates see teaching students their five "competencies" of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as the effective replacement for schools' former moral education and character formation.

Committed as they are to development of "the whole child," progressive educators are promoting these skills as a secular replacement for what parents used to instill in children according to their faith, and to cultural and family beliefs and values . . . [A]t its core, the skills of social-emotional learning aim to shift the center of moral decision-making from traditional wisdom and an awareness that we are children of God to the newly enlightened self. (Ryan, 2019, p. 4)

In its white paper, the Pioneer Institute more directly challenges the NCSEAD's reasoning about SEL's freedom from ideology. First, the authors attack the claim that SEL is based on science by challenging SEL advocates' research base. Second, they argue that SEL has not been driven by local communities but has, in fact, been pushed by elite progressive educators with help from the federal government. As they see it, the SEL movement has been closely linked to the Common Core State Standards, which were heavily promoted by the Obama administration: "SEL goes well beyond encouraging students to do their best and believe in themselves; instead, it constructs a government- and corporate-controlled edifice to measure, assess, and draw predictions from students' most fundamental private and personal characteristics" (Effrem & Robbins, 2019, p. 7).

Of course, the dispute over whether SEL is ideological is pointless, given that all education is grounded in particular values (Biesta, 2010). Whatever the NCSEAD report may claim, the SEL movement's grounding in science doesn't make it nonideological. Nor does it make sense for critics to reject SEL just because it has an ideological basis. Simply put, educators cannot set ideology aside, whether it comes to arguments over what to teach in biology, history, literature, and civics classes; whether and what sort of sex education to provide, or whether to focus on SEL. Rather than trying to deny that, advocates would be better off acknowledging their ideological positions and trying to make the strongest possible case for them.

So, too, should the NCSEAD and other advocates acknowledge that — to some extent, at least — the Pioneer Institute and others have a point when they argue that the SEL movement hasn't always been driven by local communities. Advocates may genuinely want to see support build from the ground up, but the reality is that federal policies (especially ESSA) *have* contributed to the SEL movement's recent growth. Further, it is *state* governments, not local educators and community members, that have created SEL standards, and it is CASEL's five-part framework that most states have adopted (CASEL 2019a, 2019b). That's not exactly consistent with the NCSEAD report's celebration of grassroots organizing.

More important, it ignores the danger inherent in *any* effort to apply uniform standards to all children, whether they have to do with social and emotional development or academic performance. As we've seen throughout the standards and accountability movement, an insistence on measuring all students against a single set of goals leads to individual and cultural differences being penalized, achievement gaps being created, and local traditions and creativity being suppressed. Ironically, if all schools are made to pursue the very same SEL standards, that could easily result in a rigid curriculum that causes the very kinds of stress, anxiety, and other social and emotional problems that SEL is supposed to address (Zhao, 2012, 2018a, 2018b).

Let's not start another war

I welcome efforts to reduce K-12 education's emphasis on academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. It is indeed imperative to teach the whole child, attending to their full range of academic, social, and emotional needs, as well as their physical well-being. But I think it's dangerous to view SEL as a panacea for all educational ills, or to translate it into a set of uniform standards that all students are required to master (Zhao, 2012). Similarly, I think it's a mistake for advocates to deny their own ideological biases, exaggerate the strength of the research base, or insist that every SEL-branded program or teaching practice is an integral part of a larger "movement" to transform our schools.

Nobody in K-12 education wants to get pulled into yet another education war. And while some bitter opponents of the SEL movement may be ready to fight, I'm hopeful that we can avoid an all-out conflict. Some critics have opted for a "constructive" exchange of ideas, and as Shriver and Weissberg (2020) have demonstrated, some SEL advocates are willing to join them. But while civil debate is always laudable, I suspect that in order to stave off the coming hostilities, advocates will have to do more to own up to the SEL movement's flaws, rather than reiterate the same arguments they've made before.

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