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Reflecting on Social Emotional Learning: A Critical Perspective on Trends in the United States

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This critical cultural analysis of trends in the field of social emotional learning (SEL) in the United States considers how ideas concerning emotional skills and competencies have informed programmatic discourse. While currently stressing links between SEL and academic achievement, program literature also places emphasis on ideals of caring, community, and diversity. However, recommended practices across programs tend to undermine these ideals by focusing on emotional and behavioral control strategies that privilege individualist models of self. SEL in practice thus becomes another way to focus attention on measurement and remediation of individual deficits rather than a way to redirect educators' focus toward the relational contexts of classrooms and schools. The promise of SEL to foster increased achievement and equity in American education may not be realized unless more work is done to connect ideals with practices and to address the political and cultural assumptions that are being built into contemporary approaches.

KEYWORDS: social emotional learning, cultural analysis, diversity.

Since the early 1990s, social emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a major thematic and programmatic emphasis in American education. Concerns over the vulnerability of children and youth to various social and psychological problems and the potential role of schools in ameliorating such risks have helped fuel the growing popularity of efforts to help youth become more socially and emotionally competent. By some estimates, more than 200 types of classroom based SEL programs are used in U.S. schools (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003). In 2001 the National Conference of State Legislators passed a resolution supporting the teaching of social emotional skills in schools, and in 2004 Illinois became the first state to develop specific SEL standards for K–12 students; such standards are also being considered by several other states. With the publication of Goleman's (1995) *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* and Elias et al.'s (1997) *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*, both of which had a major role in the popularization of the ideas of emotional intelligence (EI) and their application in various contexts from businesses to schooling, interest in SEL among educators and policy makers

has grown substantially. Hundreds of organizations and Web sites are devoted to the topic, many of which market SEL programs, workshops, and curricular materials to individuals, corporations, and schools. International dissemination of SEL programs is also growing; a recent publication of the International Academy of Education (IAE) lists numerous international organizations and country-specific Web sites dedicated to SEL initiatives and programs (IAE, 2005).

In addition, although SEL has yet to become a significant focus in teacher education programs in the United States, there is growing interest in addressing SEL as part of teacher preparation and in-service training. The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education has begun developing a program on moral and ethical dimensions of teacher education (Imig, 2007) that includes SEL-related themes. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and National Association for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2007) recommend a focus on social and emotional competencies in teacher education. Many other scholars (Carlson, 2007; Elias & Arnold, 2006; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003; Norris, 2003; Patti, 2006) have identified an important role for SEL in teacher education programs.

For this review, I focus on the practitioner-oriented literature in SEL, using both print and Internet sources.¹ This literature, which seeks to disseminate recommended practices and programs addressing emotional learning in schools, is a distinct outgrowth of a more general and rapidly expanding field of academic research concerned with emotions in education (Schutz & Lanehart, 2002). The latter includes a broad range of topics concerning emotions, cognition, and learning/socialization, including multiple intelligences, achievement goal theory and achievement motivation, child emotional socialization in schools and families, test anxiety, the development of emotional self-regulation and its effects, and the conceptualization and measurement of EI. Insofar as SEL largely represents school-based adaptations of EI theory and research, this review considers some of the dominant themes and issues within the EI field that appear to be significant in the SEL literature; however, this is not a comprehensive review of EI theory and research. My aim in this analysis is to highlight some of the major assumptions that characterize SEL and to open these up for deeper consideration. I see this as an important need, as SEL has gained wide currency among American educators without, according to some, adequate conceptualization and empirical study (Qualter, Gardner, & Whiteley, 2007; Waterhouse, 2006).

This analysis is, however, limited in several ways. As SEL encompasses a wide variety of programs with divergent approaches, it is virtually impossible to provide a comprehensive review of the entirety of the field. I therefore focus on the writings of major contributors to the field and on programs that have been recognized as models for good practice.² Second, the themes I identify and the texts I have chosen to illustrate them are to be read as interpretations that speak to the larger universe of discourse in the field; they are therefore open to debate and certainly to other readings. Third, this analysis aims to interpret, integrate, and critique; it is intentionally oriented toward questioning the implicit models embedded in approaches to SEL rather than simply summarizing existing positions or themes. Finally, because I am dealing largely with programmatic literature that describes and advocates particular practices or approaches, it is important to observe that what teachers or other educators really do in classrooms may be different, and

program implementations can and do diverge considerably across contexts. Yet insofar as the educator literature is prescriptive of practice, it does provide a window on some of the basic assumptions and ideas that characterize the landscape of SEL as it currently exists.

Part of the difficulty of doing any kind of research in this area concerns the basic question: What is SEL? There is a fair degree of ambiguity and conceptual confusion, as the term is often used as an umbrella for many kinds of programs, including school-based prevention programs drawing from public health, mental health, and juvenile justice perspectives, as well as programs in conflict resolution and moral or character education. Generally, and for the sake of this analysis, the term refers to programs that attempt to enhance EI and emotional literacy and/or the development of what are perceived to be fundamental social and emotional skills and competencies. These include such things as emotional awareness (being able to recognize and label one's own and other's emotions), having the capacity to express and manage emotions appropriately, making responsible decisions or choices, establishing positive social relationships, and handling difficult interpersonal situations effectively. Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, and Weissberg (2006) write that the term *SEL* was first introduced in 1994 at a meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute and attended by a group of researchers and practitioners involved with youth development, who defined it as "the process of acquiring a set of social and emotional skills—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making within the context of a safe, supportive environment" (p. 243). Although many SEL programs are add-ons to the curriculum, there are other more comprehensive approaches to SEL where the emphasis is on infusing social and emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, caring, a sense of community, and responsible decision making into the entire school experience. One of the advantages of more generalized programs, according to their advocates, is that they promote a schoolwide systematic approach that encourages fundamental social and emotional skills that improve the entire emotional, social, and academic climate of a school for all students, not just those who might be identified as being at risk.

Although some educators may see SEL as yet another burden in the already over-taxed academic and social climate of contemporary public schooling, SEL advocates point to a small but growing body of evaluation literature that shows links between SEL programs and improved outcomes in a variety of areas, particularly, teacher feelings of improved competence in the classroom, improved student behavior as measured by teacher's assessments and drops in discipline referrals, and increases in student academic achievement (Brown, Roderick, Lantieri, & Aber, 2004; Cherniss et al., 2006; Cohen, 2001; Elias & Arnold, 2006; Greenberg, Kusché, & Riggs, 2004; Rimm-Kauffman & Sawyer, 2004; Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). There is evidence programs that focus on fostering students' emotional attachment to school and engagement in the classroom produce positive results, particularly for disadvantaged students, though the emotional support dimension must go hand in hand with instructional rigor for this to occur (Becker & Luthar, 2002; C. C. Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 2003).

In a climate of increased emphasis on standards and accountability, an emphasis on positive academic achievement outcomes purportedly associated with effective emotional learning may well be a major influence on educational policy making and decisions to adopt SEL programs. Educators' interest in SEL is also fueled by versions of the youth in crisis metaphor, in which many youth problems (risk behaviors, violence, etc.) can be seen as resulting from improper or inadequate emotional socialization or education. Indeed, many prominent SEL advocates state that the "prevalence of problematic behaviors" is the most compelling reason to undertake systematic social and emotional instruction in schools (Graczyk et al., 2000, p. 392; see also Goleman, 1995). The behavioral crisis theme is also evident in the plethora of publications that have addressed the so-called failure of society to adequately nurture and support the emotional life of boys, as well as in efforts to incorporate principles of EI into parenting (e.g., Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 1999).

For some, the development of SEL reflects the popularization of neuroscience research on emotions in cognition and emotional competencies involved in social development (Mayer & Cobb, 2000). The original idea of EI, as described by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2000), was defined as measurable capacities "to process emotional information accurately and efficiently, including the capacity to perceive, assimilate, understand, and manage emotion" (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, p. 165). The emphasis in this model is on reasoning about emotions—that is, intellectual or conceptual abilities that can be clearly distinguished from other "mixed" models of EI incorporating personality traits, such as that of Bar-On (Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005, p. 36). Goleman's (1995) and Elias et al.'s (1997) interpretations of EI subsequently linked it to education and in doing so shifted attention to the idea of emotional skills as teachable competencies that should be seen as measurable predictors of academic and social success. For some observers (notably Murphy & Sideman, 2006a, 2006b), Goleman's work clearly departs from the "scientific" versions of EI and promotes a "practical" version reflected in various EI programs and interventions, especially in the business world and in education.

However, despite the strong wave of popular interest in SEL and the presence and influence of major research and advocacy organizations such as CASEL, based at the University of Illinois–Chicago, whether SEL programs are based on sound evidence and produce positive results is under debate. Large-scale independent and systematic evaluations of many programs are lacking, and reviews examining existing studies indicate serious flaws and constraints in much of the evaluation research, including a lack of experimental design and a preponderance of anecdotal, self-commissioned, and self-funded evaluations, suggesting that many of the dramatic claims for SEL are unsubstantiated (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002; Waterhouse, 2006). A U.S. Department of Education study of 41 character education programs gave positive ratings to only 2, with 7 earning "potentially positive" ratings (IES, 2007). Cherniss et al. (2006) counter that evidence linking EI to real-world success, however, is available, though they agree that "many of the studies that are cited to support the link between EI and performance have not been published in peer-reviewed journals" (p. 241). Furthermore, even if gains are demonstrated in the short run, lack of longitudinal and metacontextual studies raises issues concerning sustainability and broader context factors that may interact with

SEL programs to produce changes, if such are observed. Although a large body of research on children's social and emotional development shows that early acquisition of emotional skills and competencies is strongly associated with successful adaptations to school and higher levels of school achievement, the effects of SEL programs on promoting such developmental competencies are unclear.

Moreover, although many programs explicitly refer to EI as their "research base," sometimes it is not clear what aspects of EI, if any, are being used in the programs. Cherniss et al. (2006) note that "there has been some confusion between the underlying core abilities of EI and the many social and emotional 'competencies' that are built on those core abilities" (p. 240). In fact, reviews of the literature on EI identify considerable confusion and overlap among distinct interpretations of EI, with school-based SEL programs often emphasizing a social information processing model that focuses on interpersonal cognitions, including processing and interpretation of emotional information and integration of such information with social interactional responses and skills (Qualter et al., 2007). Other programs emphasize teaching of conflict resolution, caring, or community building, in which the focus on specific EI competencies is selective or muted. In sum, the literature on SEL paints for some a diverse, positive picture of how focusing on social and emotional competencies can benefit students and schools, whereas for others, it is rife with confusion and lack of empirical and evaluative rigor.

Rethinking the Trend: Questions and Issues

Debates over the basis for and effectiveness of EI and SEL aside, the diffusion of SEL programs across schools in the United States raises other important questions that have been largely ignored in the literature. These issues concern implicit ideologies of selfhood and their links to cultural norms for emotional expression, as well as questions of power and the structuring of educational opportunity in the United States. A brief consideration of historical antecedents to SEL also raises the question of whether it reflects merely the next chapter in a longstanding concern for the proper development of the emotions that has been part of American education for much of its history. An emphasis on educating the emotions was certainly present in the mental hygiene and child guidance movements in the earlier part of the 20th century (Boler, 1999). Many of the elements of contemporary SEL programs can also be seen in earlier discourses such as 1920s industrial psychology and 1960s and 1970s affective education, where fears of social conflict and societal breakdown led to efforts to teach social competencies and problem-solving skills (Beane, 1990; Boler, 1999; Coe & Nastasi, 2006). Concern over the power of emotions to enhance and interfere with education and socialization processes is clearly not new.³

Hargreaves (2000) argues that although emotion is often a neglected dimension in the increasingly rationalized world of current educational reform, at the same time, "more emotion is not always better" (p. 813); there ought to be critical consciousness of how emotion can also become a romanticized distraction from pressing educational problems. Boler (1999) and Kristjansson (2006), in their historical and philosophical critiques of emotional learning practices in schools, also point out the dangers of an emphasis on emotion in the classroom as a potential source of ideological manipulation. They illustrate the need for critical engagement with the ideological, political, and cultural context in which certain discourses about emotion in schooling become legitimized and popularized. In the case of SEL,

some of the questions that might be asked relate to cultural diversity and implicit cultural bias: Does a curriculum in emotional skills, for example, adequately engage with or reflect cultural diversity, or does it presume a single model of emotional competency valid across all cultural contexts? Is the very concept of “emotional skills” a useful and viable one, or would we better off looking at emotion through less of a skill-based lens? What are the assumptions made about the individual and emotion, and what are the central (implicit) values reflected in the strategies or discourse used to approach emotion? How are notions of control, power, and choice embedded in various ways of talking about SEL? Does discourse on SEL represent the emergence of a sea change in American education—a real effort to change our entire view of learning and development—or is it “old stuff” in a new guise?

Themes in the Literature on SEL

SEL as the Teaching and Learning of Skills and Competencies: Toward “Success” or Narrow Instrumentalism?

The central idea underlying most SEL programs is that explicit teaching of EI skills is both possible and necessary: “Social-emotional and life skills must be taught explicitly at the elementary and secondary levels. Like reading or math, if social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not be internalized” (Elias, 2006, p. 7). Although SEL programs may differ in their delivery (curricular add-ons vs. whole classroom/whole school change) and in their thematic focus (e.g., fostering community or reducing conflict), most programs emphasize the development of EI, defined as “skill clusters” related to self and social awareness, identifying and labeling feelings of self and others, self-management (monitoring and regulating feelings), decision-making skills, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003). Cohen (2006) observes that

all SEL programs focus on promoting students’ social and emotional competencies. And, because of the significant impact of risk-prevention and health-promotion research, they all have tended to deal with behavior and skills that can be operationally defined. Many leaders in the field underscore the importance of skills-based teaching and learning. (p. 206)

The emphasis on emotional skills reveals that emotion per se is not the focus; rather, it is the cognitive processing of emotion that is important—the “reasoning about” emotion and the behaviors one associates with such reasoning. SEL is fundamentally about psychometric and pedagogical possibility: Skills can be taught and the learner’s competence in their performance can be measured. SEL advocates see cause for optimism in the assumed measurability and teachability of emotional skills and competencies because presumably this means that individual performances can be measured, deficiencies can be assessed and remediated, and in the end all children can be taught the appropriate skills and behaviors (Goleman, 1995).

Why teach social and emotional skills? The major argument is that having EI skills leads to greater social, academic, and life success, or on a larger sense, EI skills help students become better or “happier” citizens who can contribute to a democratic society (Cohen, 2006). A dominant instrumentalist emphasis is notably

present in advocacy arguments concerning the linkages between social emotional skills and personal success:

The field of SEL has emerged from these new understandings of the nature of biology, emotions, and intelligence and their relation to success and happiness. Through social and emotional learning, children's emotional intelligence (EQ) is bolstered, giving them an enormous edge in their personal and professional futures. (Stern, 2007)

Students who feel good about themselves and have positive relationships with others are more emotionally engaged and tend to be more successful in school and later life. Social and emotional skills are fundamental building blocks that lead to a child's academic success and a positive school climate. (Committee for Children, 2007)

Elias et al. (1997) ask, "Is it possible to attain true academic and personal success without addressing SEL skills? The accumulating evidence suggests the answer is no" (pp. 2, 3).

Educators often view efforts at building such skills as standing in opposition to the academic focus of their state curriculum standards. This view hinders many well-intentioned teachers from implementing SEL in their classrooms. Thus, it is a valuable consultative tool to be able to demonstrate the overlap of SEL, academics, and curriculum standards. (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Siegle, 2004, p. 68)

In addition to portraying SEL as a road to academic and personal success for students, the literature paints a picture of benefits to teachers who feel "empowered" or otherwise in control of classroom situations that they ordinarily would find challenging and disruptive:

As teachers help to promote social and emotional learning, they will be able to lessen their students' frustrations, helping them to get their needs met in positive, healthy ways; they will also make classroom time more productive, prevent behavioral problems, build students of character, and increase academic prowess. (Lewkowicz, 2007, p. 3)

The practitioner literature has many examples of teachers who "lose it" in front of their misbehaving classrooms (see also McLaughlin, 1991) or who admit to not knowing how to deal with troubling emotions that, if expressed, would make them appear "unprofessional" who are then able to calm themselves (and their students) with their SEL programs' anger management techniques.⁴

Although few would disagree with the goal of having a positive emotional climate in their classrooms, and in principle there is nothing wrong with the idea of pursuing success, the larger question concerns what the consequences are for human relationships when the focus is on behavioral and cognitive skills and when emotion is valued as a means to success rather than as a good in itself. Unless a parallel emphasis is placed on the qualities of relationship that arguably should contextualize skills and behaviors, the discourse risks promoting a shallow, decontextualized, and narrowly instrumentalist approach to emotion in classrooms that promotes measurability and efficiency at the expense of (nonquantifiable) qualities of relatedness. Reflecting this theme, Noddings (2006) writes,

It is not simply a matter of teaching students topics and skills associated with social-emotional learning. It is essentially a matter of showing, by our own acts and attitudes, that we care about what students are going through and that we are partners in the search for meaning. . . . Perhaps we have become too dependent on rules, strategies, and recipes. . . . There is something in the current trends that should worry us. It may be that thinkers who advocate SEL are allowing themselves to be co-opted by the dominant crowd of “evidence-based,” data-driven researchers. . . . Some of this work is useful, even necessary. . . . But much of it moves us away from the heart of our concern—the kids and our relationships with them. (pp. 240–241).

Despite a rhetoric of caring and holistic values such as community and democracy, when the focus is ultimately on skills, measurement, and results, there is a chance that the less quantifiable and perhaps more genuine aspects of emotionality in schooling that inhere in human relationships may be neglected.

Culture and Emotion: A Universalist Bias?

From a cultural perspective, the kinds of skills identified with SEL appear to draw on a model of the emotions that sees them as internal, individual states that require active managerial control to be channeled in socially positive, healthy ways. The major emphasis is on calming or defusing emotions that can “boil over,” causing individuals to act in impulsive ways (Lakoff & Kovecses, 1987). The SEL literature often recommends verbalization or visualization processes involving expressing one’s feelings in words, using visualization techniques, or breathing or counting exercises. Identification, labeling, and talking about emotions are treated as key skills: “Children in the elementary grades should be able to recognize and accurately label simple emotions such as sadness, anger, and happiness” (CASEL, 2007). Illinois state standards require students to “recognize and accurately label emotions and how they are linked to behavior [and] use conversation skills to understand other’s feelings and perspectives,” such as being able to use “I messages” in talking about feelings (Illinois State Board of Education, 2006). In another area, relationship skills, “students should have the ability to describe approaches to making and keeping friends” (CASEL, 2007). Yet, as a long tradition of studies of emotion in non-Western cultural contexts has shown, norms regarding emotional expression, emotional experience, and emotional regulation are highly conditioned by culture (Briggs, 1998; Chao, 1995; Lutz, 1987, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Miller, 1982, 1996; Shweder & LeVine, 1984; White, 1987). Not all cultures interpret emotional experience in the same way, nor do they assign the same kinds of regulatory or expressive responses (such as talk) commonly shared by the White, American middle class (see also Ballenger, 1992). Wierzbicka (1994) observes that in contrast to other cultural scripts for emotional expression, in the Anglo script there is a strong emphasis on behavioral control, combined with a belief that proper expression means *talking* about one’s emotions (p. 178). She argues strongly for the influence of culture on the link between emotion and language in ways that directly challenge the universalizing claims of much psychological research on emotions in cognition.

Similarly, in addressing SEL, Saarni (1997) writes:

In many respects, these skills of emotional competence reflect Western societies' notions of "how emotion works." I refer to such beliefs as folk theories of emotion. . . . Other non-Western cultures do not necessarily view unexpressed emotions as accumulative or as explosive. (p. 47)

Tobin (1995) observes that certain assumptions about the value of "talk about the emotions" reflect the cultural preferences of the American White middle-class and a psychological establishment informed by such values, noting the power of a culturally informed ideology of emotional self-expression in American education.

Even among EI researchers, concern over the cultural subtexts in emotional learning programs is evident. For example, in looking at educational programs associated with teaching EI, Mayer and Salovey (1997) observe that there are important cultural considerations that may not be adequately addressed:

Individuals from different subcultures approach emotions differently. Although most share Western values, some will have been taught to "let it all hang out," whereas others may take a more "stoical" view. . . . School based programs . . . avoid difficult issues like whether emotional intelligence can be assessed or taught, and by which cultural or multicultural criterion it will be evaluated. (p. 21)

Denham and Weissberg (2004) caution that SEL programming must be "culturally relevant, empowering children within their unique cultural environments," also noting the possibility that "certain SEL definitions may be unique to the child's home culture" (p. 41). CASEL observes that although children have "universal developmental needs . . . in the five core areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making," cultures may vary in how core emotional competencies are expressed, making "appropriate adaptation" important. Self-awareness on the part of teachers is also recommended:

SEL programs have evolved by and large through a Eurocentric lens at both the research and program development levels, but the five SEL competencies might be expressed differently in different cultural contexts. For example, some African-Americans may hesitate to use I-messages because of their cultural upbringing. . . . The challenge today is for teachers to be aware of their own cultural leanings and how they fit—or don't fit—with their students' cultural beliefs and behaviors. (Lantieri, as quoted in CASEL, 2007)

There does appear to be a recognition in the literature that cultural differences and diversity may make some kinds of SEL problematic without sufficient "adaptation" and/or "self-awareness." Although there is not a large literature on the issues related to adaptation or evaluation studies of SEL programs' effects on minority group individuals, there have been reports of successful "community, culture, and caring" programs and schools targeting specific minority groups (see CASEL, 2005; Ebisch, 2005, on the Escuela Tlatelolco; see also Rotheram-Boris & Tsembaris, 1989). The CASEL Web site lists several SEL programs that address cultural diversity and/or include multicultural materials. In their study of the implementation of prevention programs across cultures, Castro, Barrera, and Martinez (2004, as cited in CASEL, 2005) observed that adaptation is common, and that it requires attention to "surface structure (i.e., role models used in teaching lessons) and to deep structure (i.e., core values, norms, etc.)."

From another perspective, however, cautions about the need to adapt SEL to different cultural beliefs and values might pay lip service to cultural difference without engaging it at a truly deep level, especially if fundamental assumptions about such things as “universal developmental needs,” or the nature of “positive relationships” remain intact. This is highly likely given that the underlying emotional skills and competencies identified with SEL are frequently described at such a high level of abstraction (e.g., “being aware of other’s feelings” or “knowing how to make friends”) that they seem universally relevant, obscuring the degree to which basic concepts (what is a friend, for example? or a feeling, for that matter?) may mean very different things in different cultures. Adapting programs to cultural differences is, of course, better than not doing so, but it has its own set of difficulties—not the least of which is that the process often assumes and encourages fixed or trait-based interpretations of difference that locate cultural meaning in behaviors, gestures, norms, and so on, instead of in the situation or interactional context. (For example, “X people show respect by avoiding direct eye contact” when in fact they also show disrespect by avoiding direct eye contact, too, depending on the situation.) When it comes to understanding the play of emotion and its interrelationship with complex cultural domains of significance such as experiences and understandings of self and others, the difficulties of encoding such understandings into “teachable SEL competencies” for “all children” become evident.

*The Self in SEL: The Ideals of a Caring Community and
the Practices of Individualist Control*

All models of emotional competence are in fact deeply intertwined with culturally normed ideas about selfhood (M. Lewis & Saarni, 1985; Lutz, 1985; Rosaldo, 1980; Shweder & LeVine, 1984), and one prominent dimension of culturally shaped models of self and emotion concerns ideals and practices regarding emotional regulation. In the SEL literature, emotional regulation is highlighted as a key area of skill development, and although positive emotions are sometimes mentioned, the major concern is with the regulation of negative and disruptive emotions (e.g., Patti, 2006; Reissman, 2006). In one popular program, desirable emotional outcomes are described in terms of “improved self-control, understanding and recognition of emotions, increased ability to tolerate frustration, . . . decreased aggression and other conduct problems” (Kusché & Greenberg, 2006, p. 153). In another program, “problem solving for impulse control” is highlighted, combined with emotional management strategies “that help students recognize anger cues and triggers and use positive self-statements and stress reduction techniques to prevent the onset of uncontrollable angry feelings,” followed by verbalizations such as thinking out loud to solve the problem (Duffell, Beland, & Frey, 2006, pp. 166–167).

Many other techniques and strategies for teaching children emotional control are recommended in the literature, including the use of breathing and counting exercises and visual and tactile aids, for example: stop light or control signals posters (red for stop, identify feelings, calm down; yellow for consider alternative solutions and consequences; green for choose the best plan and carry it out), or “calming toys” for younger children (such as the Impulsive Puppy, Slow-Down Snail Puppets, and Be-Calm Bunny Plush Toy).⁵ Another program uses a “freeze” bell or chime (called, interestingly, a “safety signal”) that tells children to stop what they are doing immediately and pay attention; they may not move again until a “melt” signal is given (Charney,

2002, p. 38). Other recommended practices include “pretzels” (an exercise used to “objectify rewards and reparations”; Charney, 2002, p. 257) and the “turtle technique,” used in several programs, where children are taught how to “relax their muscles to cope with internal tension” (Denham & Weissberg, 2004, p. 35) to develop self-control. Other ways of teaching self-control involve time-outs and removal of children from classrooms:

It’s language arts time in Mr. Jeffrey’s third grade class. The children have settled into their writing assignments. Mr. Jeffrey is working with a small group when he notices Lucia across the room distracting her neighbors with chatter.

“Lucia, do your work and let others do theirs,” he says in an even voice. Lucia quiets down, but a moment later takes out some fingernail polish, starts doing her nails, and offers to do her neighbors’. “Lucia, time-out,” Mr. Jeffrey says calmly and firmly. Lucia goes to the time-out area but protests angrily. While in time-out, she bangs her feet loudly against a nearby bookcase, mutters insults about the teacher, and tries to catch her classmates’ eyes. After a minute or two of this, Mr. Jeffrey says to another student, “James, go tell Ms. Daniels that we need her.” James quietly leaves the room, returning shortly with Ms. Daniels.

Upon Ms. Daniels’s arrival, Mr. Jeffrey says to Lucia, “You need to go with Ms. Daniels now.” Wordlessly, Ms. Daniels escorts Lucia to her own classroom for a time-out there while Mr. Jeffrey continues working with the class. (Yang & Charney, 2005)

The description of Mr. Jeffrey’s interactions with the student Lucia emphasizes his emotional self-control: He reprimands her in an “even voice”; he gives the time-out command “calmly and firmly.” When Lucia fails to respond appropriately, he simply tells James, “Go tell Ms. Daniels we need her.” Ms. Daniels “wordlessly” escorts Lucia from the classroom. In contrast we have the student Lucia, who “protests angrily,” “bangs her feet against the bookcase,” and “mutters insults.” The teachers simultaneously suppress their own emotions and symbolically erase the emotionality of the student by removing her from the classroom. The process is supposed to allow the student to regain self-control (assuming that it is indeed self-control that she lacks). One wonders how practices such as time-outs, removal of children from classrooms, and defining behavior problems as issues of *student* “self-control” genuinely address the emotions that arise in a situation on the part of all parties involved. Instead, they could easily be used by a teacher as techniques to erase or mitigate emotions the teacher finds difficult to deal with. Moreover, how do these practices qualify as implementations of the ideal of an *emotionally responsive classroom*?

Although in the short run these approaches may solve the problem of classroom disruption, in the long run they do not engage with the larger and deeper questions surrounding the issues of belonging and community in classrooms and schools. This becomes clearer, perhaps, when one contrasts the approach to misbehavior advocated here with what occurs in classrooms in Japan.⁶ The goals in both American and Japanese cases are similar: the development of self-regulation. However, the Japanese approach focuses not on rules, contracts, external behaviors, or physical interventions such as removal of children from classrooms but on the consistent cultivation of positive bonds of emotional attachment and belonging:

When misbehavior occurs, then, Japanese discipline tends to be emotional, not legalistic or mechanical. It appeals to feelings and to the child’s bonds to teacher and other children. Often it tries to strengthen those bonds. The

Japanese discipline I saw contrasted sharply with behavioral approaches . . . found in many American schools. (C. C. Lewis, 1995, p. 137)

The Japanese method of conflict resolution . . . relies on the interpersonal unity of the Japanese classroom. . . . On the other hand, the conflict resolution programs developed in the United States often look individualistic, involving those directly in the dispute, and are underlined by a contractual principle. (Tsuneyoshi, 2001, pp. 159–160)

To define a child's problem as one of individual self-control (as in the American example) rather than one of "not feeling sufficiently attached to the classroom community" (as in the Japanese example) fundamentally changes the kind of response that is made to the situation. Thus, in the U.S. case, an individual problem requires an individual solution (time-out or removal from class—further enforcing the separation of the individual from the group). In Japan, "acting out" is never an individual problem; it means the child needs more emotional connection to the class and teacher, not less, making techniques of teacher-imposed segregation rare. Instead, teachers redouble efforts to connect the child to the class, perhaps by giving the child extra attention, privileges, or using other kinds of supportive emotional encouragement (C. C. Lewis, 1995; Peak, 1991).

Choice represents another prominent theme in the discourse on emotional regulation. In one highly evaluated SEL program (and this program is not unique in this regard) student misbehaviors were almost invariably characterized as "choices":

If a child doesn't follow the rules, you might say, "You'll have to wait until a teacher is able to go with you. It's *your* choice." (Charney, 2002, p. 40)

When I say "time out," I am responding to a choice that the student has made. The choice is either to follow meeting rules or to go to time out. It is a true decision. . . . The vocabulary of time out establishes over and over again the choices available and, importantly, the consequences of those choices. "You can speak quietly to your partner, or, if you get loud and silly, you go to time-out. Your choice." (Charney, 2002, p. 185)

Instead of addressing the complex emotional, interpersonal, or social interactional contexts that are always implicated in behavior, this approach reduces behavior to a rational choice, privileging a model of individual accountability where behavior problems can be addressed through rules and consequences, without regard for emotions:

Pencils are for writing, Stephen . . . [teacher takes the pencil away.] When you are ready to use the pencil appropriately, tell me and I'll give it back.

We agreed to throw the ball underhand and not whip it for this game. I'll take the ball now. Maybe we can try again tomorrow. (Charney, 2002, p. 33)

The SEL program described previously recommends behavior contracts that specify rewards and consequences, basing its classroom management techniques and practices fundamentally in a highly individualist, rational-contractual, almost neo-behaviorist view of children—all while emphasizing the importance of values of caring and community!

By comparison, in a Japanese classroom studied by C. C. Lewis (1995), the teacher stops a child from throwing a stone by reminding him of how the other boy might feel if he were hit by touching it to his head but proceeds immediately to give the stone back to him. In another example, a teacher who does not want a child to peel a pencil does not state a rule (“Pencils are for writing”), nor does she take it away from the child, but appeals to the emotions that the pencil would have if it were peeled (“Your pencil will feel miserable”; C. C. Lewis, 1995, pp. 132, 136). What stands out in teacher discussions of group life in Japanese classrooms is an unabashed discourse on positive emotions (e.g., unity, happiness, cheerfulness, enthusiasm, enjoyment), not a discourse of following rules, setting up behavior contracts, or organizing activities. Peak (1991) illustrates how positive emotions are the essence of Japanese teacher’s understanding of successful group life for children; instructional objectives in one preschool included “learn the fun of playing vigorously outdoors,” “enjoy summer games and play,” and “know the fun of participating in group activities” (p. 69). Moreover, from a Japanese perspective, the very notion of community or group is defined in terms of the quality of human relationships, and the centrality of “heart” to those relationships:

The key to all learning is the *quality* of relations, and when *hearts are touched* in equally meaningful fashion, inclusive of all, then *genuine* community is occurring, as human hearts inescapably develop in tandem with any academic focus on intellect or mind. [In Japan] special attention is given to the qualities of students’ hearts throughout the day: Are they calm? Open? Understanding? Touching? Sincerely or artificially? Deeply or superficially? . . . The centrality of “heart” (*kokoro*) and the necessity of togetherness . . . both represent fundamental tenets of a Japanese educational philosophy. (Sato, 2005, p. 3)

Teachers speak of *kokoro*—the heart—as a basis of education. For example, a veteran elementary teacher declared: “My focus is on educating children’s *kokoro*, an important concern throughout my teaching career.” . . . Teachers’ repeated references to *kokoro* suggest its ontological status in the universe of a child’s experience. (Shimahara, 2002, pp. 21–22)

Many SEL programs similarly highlight the key role of empathetic, caring, supportive relationships among teachers, students, and parents; cooperative learning opportunities; and allowing students both autonomy and influence in the classroom (Mugno & Rosenblitt, 2001; Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002; Schaps, 2003). However, the caring community, when translated into practice, becomes a discourse about activities and behaviors teachers get children to engage in, including classroom meetings, sharing circles, structured exercises such as role playing, collaborative group activities, and individual behaviors such as taking turns and sharing, following rules, and making good choices rather than a language of feelings or emotional connectedness.⁷ What is essentially happening is that when it comes to describing and recommending actual practices of classroom management, the language of caring ideals often devolves to a discourse about control, rules, contracts, choices, activities, and organizational structures. In effect, substance is replaced by structure; feeling is replaced by form. Most tellingly, caring and community are conceptualized as things teachers teach *children* to do by getting them to behave in appropriate ways (e.g., “teaching children to care”; Charney, 2002; “teaching community to 6th graders”; Crawford, 1998). Caring and community

become lessons taught by teachers to children rather than deeply felt shared emotions embedded in the human relationships of the classroom and thus, perhaps, as things *teachers* may need to develop in themselves.⁸

When emotions are treated as cognitive information-processing skill sets, behaviors become rational choices, and caring becomes an object lesson in good behavior taught by teachers to students, it behooves us to ask if there is not some disconnect between the ideals of SEL and its practices. As several anthropologists and other scholars have pointed out, the disconnect between cultural ideals and practices, or between desired outcomes and what actually happens when ideals are translated into practice, has long been characteristic of American education. Lee (1955/1963) found clear discrepancies between expressed ideals of promoting “social warmth and human relationships” and recommended practices that involved engaging in certain kinds of activities and controlling negative emotions and conflicts—themes that are strikingly parallel to what is seen in much of the SEL literature. Similarly, Weinstein (1998) shows that although the rhetoric of classroom management in the United States stresses the importance of caring for students and fostering responsibility, this translates in practice into “easily implemented strategies such as material rewards to gain compliance [and] negative, coercive interventions” (p. 67), concluding that “the rhetoric and the reality are strikingly incongruent.” Spindler (1963, 1997) has written many times of the discrepancies between intent and outcome that consistently appear in American education.

Overall, my analysis indicates a need for more work in developing an approach to social and emotional education that is not so much about developing better skills and measures as about developing ways to link ideals with practices. This would involve connecting the language of research more realistically and more humanely with the language and *experience* of emotion in teaching and learning, and not substituting one for the other.

It is also important to remember that it may be easier to implement the ideals of caring and community in some cultural contexts than in others. Perhaps communities and schools that have been successful in developing practices that instantiate their own visions of care can serve as models for others to learn from. Indeed, if viewed as a resource instead of as a problem to be solved, the very existence of cultural variation in U.S. classrooms can be a resource for discovering alternative ways to develop practices that can support ideals and goals of emotional learning.⁹

SEL and Educational Opportunity: Potentials and Pitfalls

A significant aspect of the politics of SEL concerns the ways its emphasis on measurable individual competencies may ultimately connect with the structures governing social and educational opportunity in U.S. society. For SEL advocates, being able to distinguish between emotionally competent and less competent children as early as age 4 is seen as a positive thing because it allows interventions for the less competent (Shure, 2006, p. 92). Similarly, Denham and Weissberg (2004) write,

[Early childhood educators ought to] intervene in an organized, systematic way to enhance SEL competencies, prevent SEL deficits, and intervene when SEL deficits already exist. . . . There are children [whose] behaviors are already challenging themselves and others; they are already taxed to develop age-appropriate SEL skills. These children will benefit from more targeted

intervention. . . . For teachers and caregivers of young children who are already demonstrating signs of SEL deficits, behavior management must be an integral part of SEL programming. (pp. 14, 28, 34)

There are indeed serious political, social, and ethical consequences if SEL is defined as an individual competency subject to the lens of deficiency and remediation. How are SEL deficits to be compared with other kinds of deficits? Does having an SEL deficit affect a child differently from having another type of deficit? What are the relative equity costs of intervening versus not intervening?¹⁰ As New (1998) observes,

The perspective taken by U.S. researchers frequently reflects a deficit model of children that begins with assumptions of risk for those who fail to demonstrate particular indicators for social competencies. . . . Research summaries repeatedly proclaim that children who lack minimal competence in their early social relations with peers are at risk for a variety of subsequent failures, both academic and social. (p. 90)

Yet, when the focus is on what is “wrong” with the individual child and what can be done to change the child, attention is directed away from the equally if not more critical aspects of what can be done to change the social contexts and cultural systems in which the child is a participant—those that highlight deficiencies and make them significant in the first place (McDermott & Varenne, 2006). In this regard, Apple’s (2004) observations are apt:

One is now much more interested in the “whole child,” if you will. Therefore, emotionality, dispositions, physicality, and other more general attributes are added to the usual academic curricula as overt areas one must be concerned with. The latent result seems to be to *increase the range of attributes* upon which students may be stratified. That is, by changing the definition of school knowledge so that it includes more personal and dispositional elements, one is also latently enabling a wider possibility of labeling to go on in more “open” environments. Student identities can be even more fixed than before. This probably occurs because the basic goals of the institution—e.g., sorting students according to “natural talent,” maximizing the production of technical knowledge, etc.—are not really changed. (p. 134)

If SEL is harnessed to the larger patterns of individual and group deficiency, risk, and differential access that affect American education, as it already seems to be, its promise to change the goals of schooling—and the lenses applied to assess those goals—cannot be realized. Thus, in my view a concern for the politics of SEL must go beyond concern for “what works” or at least take the “what works” question more seriously in terms of the structures of differential educational opportunity. As long as SEL promotes a view of social and emotional competencies as individual abilities or deficiencies, the “what works” question cannot generate a new level of focus on social contexts of learning and achievement and the importance of emotion as a key element of those contexts.

As many writers on emotion in language and culture have shown, discourses on emotion are always intimately related to issues of social power (Boler, 1999; Leavitt, 1994; Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990; Polakow, 1992). Zembylas (2007) writes:

Emotions in the classroom, for example, are not only a private matter but also a *political* space in which students and teachers interact with implications in larger political and cultural struggles. . . . The politics of emotion . . . challenges the cultural and historical emotion norms with respect to what emotions are, how they are expressed, who gets to express them and under what circumstances. It is in this sense that there is always something political in which teachers and students are caught up as they relate emotionally to one another across classroom spaces. (pp. 293–294)

As policies and programs increasingly rely on cognitive information processing, therapeutic, rational/contractual, efficiency, or choice models for exploring and understanding the place of emotion in school learning, it is important to situate these discourses within a politics of schooling that is cognizant of very real issues of power that legitimize certain discourses on emotion and delegitimize others. Arguably, a more authentic concern for emotion in children's school experiences demands less a focus on what a child can or cannot do than on what we as a culture and society define and value in framing the place of emotion in our schools and collective life.

Ostensibly, the SEL movement is about changing educational practice in ways that support positive emotional climates in classrooms and schools by building individual emotional competencies. The SEL movement has made a valuable contribution at some level, for it has attempted to raise educators' and policy makers' consciousness of the need for attention to the emotional domain in schooling, if only for instrumental purposes such as achievement and personal success. The goals of fostering students' sense of belonging and attachment to teachers and classmates at school are eminently desirable, and there are indications that some SEL programs can enhance such feelings. However, more research and critical inquiry are needed to determine whether the dominant emphasis on individual competencies and behavioral management in many programs in fact contributes to such ideals. In my view, changing the emotional climate of classrooms and schools in positive ways to cultivate experiences of caring, community, and belonging is much needed, but this is a different claim from seeing a need to teach emotional and behavioral management skills.

Different avenues and traditions for approaching emotion in education, both in the United States and abroad, can perhaps be resources to frame improvements in SEL. In the United States, for example, certain approaches to teaching writing (e.g., the National Writing Project), Noddings's (2005) work on caring, and a wide-ranging literature that addresses emotion and spirituality in schools can all be drawn on to reframe an approach to emotion that may more genuinely connect practice to emotion ideals. Affective education has for years been an international movement; U.S. educators can and should study innovative approaches and programs from other countries. Furthermore, well-developed approaches to emotion in schooling can be found in other cultures, both among minority and immigrant communities in the United States and abroad. In Italy (and in many other places around the world where it is being used), the approach to early education seen in Reggio Emilia provides a model of community and caring that appears to avoid the excesses of the individualist and behaviorist lenses. In Japan, as I have suggested here, a large scholarly literature exists on the place of emotion in schooling that

provides a very different and rich view of just what valuing emotion in schools and classrooms can look like.

Although it may well be too early to judge what the long-term developments in the field will be, this analysis has suggested that SEL has failed to engage in a deep way with questions of cultural diversity, with the politics of power, and with the real risks to educational opportunity of assuming yet another lens that defines educational problems in terms of individual deficits and their remediation. Although SEL promises more attention to the emotional and social lives of children as these are integrally related to successful and more equitable academic and life outcomes for all, existing debates focus largely on questions of empirical basis and effectiveness. Although these issues are not insignificant, they need to take place in the context of a shift in the lens with which educators examine the nature of achievement in U.S. society toward a more context-based, relational, and cultural-situational view of problems and their solutions. More work is needed to link the ideals of SEL with its practices and in so doing to create and retain the promise that a genuine focus on the cultivation of a positive emotional climate in schools might have for change in U.S. education.

Notes

¹Waterhouse (2006) illustrates a dramatic growth in Web-related emotional intelligence (EI) and social emotional learning (SEL) sites from 2003 to 2005, noting that EI.edu Web sites increased from 14,700 to 220,000 and EI education workshops increased from 9,180 to 45,100 (p. 207). For this study, given the impossibility of a comprehensive review, I selected Web sites associated with major SEL research and dissemination centers and initiatives, including the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; <http://www.CASEL.org>); the Center for Social and Emotional Education (<http://www.csee.net>); New York University Child Study Center (<http://www.AboutOurKids.org>); Educators for Social Responsibility (<http://www.ESRnational.org>); Six Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network (<http://www.6Seconds.org>), Responsive Classroom (<http://www.ResponsiveClassroom.org>); the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) Network for Affective Learning (<http://www.ascd.org>); the Child Development Project/Caring School Community (<http://www.devstu.org>); and The Committee for Children (<http://www.cfchildren.org>).

²This review examined the literature associated with the following SEL programs: Social Decision-Making/Social Problem Solving, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, Resolving Conflict Creatively, the Responsive Classroom, Second Step, and Caring School Community. All of these programs have been ranked as “select” programs by CASEL (2003), meaning programs that meet the highest standards of design, sound practice, effectiveness, and implementation support. However, because I recognize that program developers and researchers have investments (personal, professional, and financial) in their programs and materials, I have attempted as much as possible not to identify or name specific programs in my examples of practices or texts. While these examples are necessarily drawn from specific programs, this review should not be taken in any way as a critique of specific programs but rather as a general critique of trends within the literature.

³Other observers have raised the question of whether SEL should be seen as yet another educational movement or trend along the likes of the “Thinking Skills” movement of the 1980s. Brandt (1999) suggests that here are indeed parallels: Both

share important characteristics related to the nature of their development and diffusion, including being “closely identified with a forceful, charismatic developer who has devoted a great deal of time and attention to the program’s development” and being “available in published form, usually with materials for students and teachers” (p. 177).

⁴Here is an example: “Pay Attention!” Mitch slammed his math book down on a desk. The noise stopped. Several children looked at him with big eyes. Rachel looked like she was about to cry. Mitch glanced from Rachel to the . . . anger management poster on the wall. . . . Swallowing his pride, Mitch relaxed and said aloud, ‘I’ve got to calm down. I’ll take three deep breaths’” (Duffell, Beland, & Frey, 2006).

⁵I am not making this up. These items are for sale in Pre-K/K SEL teaching kit as part of a program that has received CASEL’s highest rating.

⁶The ethnographic literature on classrooms in Japan provides a rich portrait of classrooms where emotion is central and valued for its own sake rather than for instrumental aims such as better classroom control or increased student achievement. I use the examples from this literature carefully, with full awareness that there are important differences between Japan and the United States that make comparisons difficult and with awareness of the great diversity that exists in each society with regard to classroom practices.

⁷Another important point is that there is no necessary connection between particular forms of activity and emotions or experiences of caring; for example, a class that is organized around “cooperative activities” might not be more “caring” than one that is not, though on the surface it might look like the cooperatively organized class might be more likely to produce a “caring community” of learners.

⁸Making a similar point, Noddings (2006) writes, “I am a bit bothered by the great emphasis in current research on teaching *the kids* social skills such as listening. Of course it is important for students to learn how to listen and treat one another with some sensitivity, but is also important that *teachers listen to students*” (p. 239).

⁹Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these points.

¹⁰Although it is dangerous to do something, it is often just as dangerous to do nothing, as a reviewer pointed out. The latter approach can often be used simply to allow the status quo to continue.

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