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Scott N. Edgar & Bob Morrison

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A vision for Social Emotional Learning and arts education policy

Scott N. Edgar^a and Bob Morrison^b

^aLake Forest College, Lake Forest, Illinois, USA; ^bQuadrant Research, Warren, New Jersey, USA

ABSTRACT

This issue represents one of the first objective, collaborative pieces addressing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) across all arts content areas in diverse areas of policy. The results justify further investigation into the congruence of the arts and SEL, exploring examples of SEL instruction in the arts, and the development of consistent messages for arts education utilizing SEL. The role of SEL in arts education is still being discovered; however, the support of how the arts are a proper environment for SEL is only growing. This conclusion provides an overview of the varied levels of policy related to SEL and arts education, provides one example of artistic SEL integration (New Jersey Arts Education and SEL Learning Framework), expands on policy implications and opportunities, and concludes with strategies to utilize SEL as an advocacy tool for arts education.

KEYWORDS

Social Emotional Learning;
arts education
policy; standards

The purpose of this forward-looking conclusion to the special focus issue *Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the Arts: Policies, Practices, and Interpretations* is to review and extrapolate on the policy recommendations each author brought forth in their analyses of SEL and arts education. Despite the varying levels of explicit connections between SEL and arts education policy, the intrinsic connection is becoming more and more evident. In the words of the National Association for Music Education Executive Director (at the time of publication), Mike Blakeslee:

Arts education certainly can and does align with SEL outcomes. Music curricula will increasingly be designed to specifically target the SEL outcomes desired by parents, teachers, and the community – not as a replacement for developing musical excellence, but as an optimal way of using the power of musical experiences to help students develop and grow. We, as arts teachers, work as advocates to help decision-makers understand the inherent value of the arts. Social Emotional Learning can help strengthen that argument.

All of the articles in this issue point to one common conclusion: the congruence of arts education and SEL policy is ripe; however, additional attention to making this connection intentional and consistent is needed.

New Jersey SEL arts standards

One of the most explicit examples of arts policy and SEL is the New Jersey Social Emotional Learning Arts

Standards project led by Bob Morrison (Quadrant Research, CEO). Morrison suggests it is essential to “help [arts educators] understand how to incorporate SEL strategies into their own practices so they may be intentional about the approach and recognize the unique role that arts educators must play as partners in the SEL movement in their own schools. It is also important that the broader SEL community recognizes and embraces the powerful role of the arts in this movement as well. There is an advocacy component that needs to develop.”

A Model for a SEL/Arts Crosswalk- Bob Morrison

In New Jersey, we began wrestling with the question, “How do we intentionally connect SEL to the work in our arts classrooms?” Since New Jersey was in the process of revising the state’s visual and performing arts standards (based on the National Core Arts Standards and the Artistic Processes of Creating, Performing, Responding and Connecting) and, since the New Jersey State Department of Education had already adopted competencies for SEL (including the five CASEL competencies of Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision Making as well as 19 sub-competencies divided between them) in 2017, we decided our approach would be to crosswalk the two documents to develop a blended way to consider both the SEL competencies and the New Jersey’s Student

Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts Standards to coincide with the curricular revision and adoption created by the release of the new standards. The result of this work was New Jersey's SEL Arts Education Standards Framework.

The SEL Arts Education Standards Framework was designed by a team of experts (Bob Morrison and Dr. Maurice Elias, co-chairs) in the areas of SEL and Arts Education with members drawn from SEL4NJ and Arts Ed NJ. This team explored all of the intersections between SEL and Arts Education through the lens of the arts standards. This approach maintained the focus on the primary goal of teaching the arts while making a clear connection to SEL to inform the instructional approach. This allowed the team to illuminate the inherent nature of SEL within arts education and how this can be activated in students intentionally.

This crosswalk or “matrix” approach to revealing the intersections between arts education and SEL served two primary goals:

- Empowering arts educators with the information they need to revise curricula and instruction to embed the activation of the SEL components into practice.
- Providing arts educators, administrators, and other decision-makers with the information needed to elevate the understanding of how arts education is a valuable tool to support the implementation of SEL strategies in a school or district.

As New Jersey moved toward the implementation of the newly adopted Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts Standards, the SEL Arts Education Standards Framework became a critical resource. Districts across New Jersey are required by law to revise their own curricula to come into alignment with these new arts standards (www.selarts.org) by September of 2022. By embracing this approach, schools and districts accelerated the incorporation of SEL into the curriculum during the revision process in a way that underscored the inherent nature of SEL within the arts.

Worldwide Day of Gratitude. One of the first examples using this framework came about during the Worldwide Day of Gratitude (Spring, 2020). Developed by the student-led organization YOUNISON, the day was designed to pay honor first responders and healthcare workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic through a global coming together through the arts.

Recognizing that “Music has long served as a unifying force during challenging times,” for Worldwide Day of Gratitude (<https://www.younison.org/leanonus>), teachers, students, and the general public, were invited to learn and share the iconic Bill Withers song, “Lean on Me,” which emerged as a rallying cry for the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the lesson plans developed stated: “The primary goal of this lesson is to learn the song “Lean on Me,” and be able to sing it or play it on an instrument. Regardless of instrumental, vocal, or general music, listening to the song/analyzing the lyrics will allow musicians to further connect emotionally with the music... By reflecting on this day after, hopefully, we will all see the value of practicing gratitude in our own life”

The essential questions and enduring understandings addressed from the SEL Arts Education Standards Framework were:

EQ: How does the awareness of one's strengths, limitations, feelings, and thoughts influence the generation of creative ideas?

EU: Managing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are an integral part of the generation, refinement, and completion of creative ideas

By using the idea of expressing gratitude through the vehicle of music educators made powerful connections between the lyrics, the music, and the idea of gratitude. Students not only created their own versions of the song, but they were also inspired to dance, draw, create messages of thanks, and have them delivered to hospitals. This was a powerful and compelling lesson because of the strong connection between the music and SEL as documented by the more than 20 million people engaged in the effort.

We know from arts practitioners that for arts SEL to be effective, it must be embedded into artistic pedagogical content (Edgar & Elias, this issue). The only way to accomplish this is to intentionally explore the connections between SEL and the Arts through the lens of instructional practice. By taking the approach we have in New Jersey, our educators now have a powerful tool to enable them to do just that. This may serve as a model for use by districts and states across the nation.

Advancing arts education/SEL policy Scott N. Edgar & Bob Morrison

This issue highlighted specific areas where policy could align more strongly between SEL and arts education.

Relevance for national/state policy

As states support SEL inclusion (at least 40 at the time of publication), connections to both funding and policy-creation are imperative. Ensuring that federal and state policy addressing SEL and arts education complement each other instead of poaching each other is essential when exploring uses of funding: “Arts education advocates might work with SEL proponents in encouraging Congress to fully fund Title IV, which could potentially benefit both groups. Yet, if calls for arts education funding become drowned out by attention to SEL (or any other interest), arts educators may risk receiving little or no funding for other resources that they deem pressing” (Kapalka Richerme, this issue). This is a call to action for K-12 practitioners and administrators to utilize Title funding with the rationale that support must be for arts education, justified by the intentional implementation of SEL and the fertile ground arts education provides for instruction, not to fund standalone SEL practices (Eddy, et al., this issue).

Beyond the effort to provide additional funding at the federal level, efforts should be focused on gaining recognition for the SEL and arts education connection. As we have seen with prior efforts (particularly around Title I) just because federal and state resources *may* be used for something does not mean it will happen. Elevating awareness for policy makers at the federal and state level will help shape the degree arts education is viewed in a substantial light. Being seen by policymakers outside of the arts education field as having relevance in the SEL world is critical.

One of the ways this may be accomplished is a more intentional effort to engage with the SEL associations at the federal and state level. CASEL is widely recognized as the leading voice for SEL in the United States. Engaging CASEL to provide additional focus on the intersection between the SEL and arts education would elevate the stature of arts education with this core community and provide great weight to policy requests emerging from such collaboration.

On the state level SEL policy organizations are developing under the umbrella of SEL4US (Edgar & Elias, this issue). Arts education leaders in each state should join with these groups to learn more about efforts to expand SEL as well as to be a voice for the SEL/arts education connection. Through these interactions new collaborations may develop to help advance policy beneficial to arts education. This is how New Jersey’s SEL Arts Education Standards Framework came to be. It was born during a small group discussion at an SEL4NJ committee meeting.

Assessments for artistic SEL are emerging: “More research is needed especially given the context-dependent nature of arts environments... It is our hope that the focus on prioritizing student-derived data, deep reflection on the arts and SEL skills/processes, as well as the power of collaboration are models that future research will build upon” (Halverson & Lashley, this issue). While implementation and policy advance, caution must be given to ask arts educators to assess SEL competencies (Hellman & Milling; Kalpalka Richerme, this issue). To avoid positioning arts to teachers to assess areas they are neither qualified nor prepared for, all assessments seeking to show SEL benefit in an arts classroom must first be artistic, with SEL embedded (Edgar, 2017). Policy, standards, and teacher evaluation criteria must reflect this arts-first approach.

National/state arts education associations (NAfME, SEADAE, and ArtsEd New Jersey) are embedding SEL into position statements, resources, and advocacy campaigns. Determining ways to be consistent in arts education policy and promotion is essential for developing a common, centralized voice. The creation of a SEL arts alliance would accomplish this task. Finally, national and state education SEL education policy is needed to further guide SEL instruction in K-12 schools and provide consistency (with flexibility) in implementation.

Relevance for standards-based instruction

The ambitious work by Omasta, et al. (this issue) highlights the need to crosswalk standards and objectives between SEL and arts education. “Given the generally indirect alignment of the NCAS and SEL goals, the authors recommend that educators who wish to pursue both arts learning and SEL goals engage in conscious planning to ensure both types of learning occur” (Omasta, et al., this issue). Further investigation is needed to find opportunities in all of the arts content areas to embed SEL into the arts. The subjectivity of standards interpretation and implementation is further complicated when addressing inter- and intra-personal elements. Intersections between arts standards and SEL are explicitly and implicitly present. Additional work at the national-, state-, and district-level, similar to that conducted by New Jersey, would be valuable to interpret the crosswalk for different contexts.

Relevance for arts teacher education

Perhaps the largest incongruence between policy and practice related to SEL and arts education was found

in arts teacher education. As K-12 districts begin to implement SEL instruction more regularly and include SEL as an expectation in instruction, additional attention in teacher preparation programs will be warranted. “Our findings revealed conceptual connections with differing degrees of alignment but no explicit mention of SEL” (Hellman & Milling, this issue). Adding another course into undergraduate arts teacher education programs is often not feasible; however, finding organic places to embed and model artistic SEL instruction into the current curriculum will help prepare teachers for K-12 school expectations. Relying on general education courses for this material will not allow for pre-service arts teachers to interpret SEL for the arts. Adding language specifically addressing SEL into arts teacher preparation standards, lesson plan templates, scope and sequences, and curriculum will help institutions of higher learning align with expectations from accrediting agencies and help prepare pre-service teachers for changing educational systems.

Relevance for local-level implementation

As K-12 districts and administrators are feeling more pressure to address students’ social and emotional health, teachers are going to be asked to embed SEL instruction into their subject area. The possibilities for local-level implementation and policy are rich; however, are under-realized: “Policy can include more explicit SEL goals within Arts Education standards, funding for more space or equipment needed for the arts, teacher education that explicitly conveys SEL competencies through arts lessons” (Eddy, et al., this issue). The inclusion of district-level professional development on artistic SEL is necessary to help teachers meet these expectations and maximize instructional time while organically embedding SEL. Finally, school districts will need to support arts teachers as they meet students’ social emotional health through SEL by: (a) including SEL-specific language in both district and fine arts mission statements; (b) providing arts teachers with resources to instruct embedded SEL; (c) ensure other resources are in place to aid arts teachers in their mission to support students’ including a district-level SEL coordinator, adequate mental health professionals, and opportunities for teachers to collaborate across subject areas related to SEL instruction.

Critiques of SEL

The push for SEL in K-12 schools is undeniable; however, given the generally positive acceptance of SEL, acknowledging critiques is warranted.

Is social emotional learning a temporal fad in education?

Educators at all levels become weary of initiatives that lack traction. SEL could be interpreted as one of these due to the “all-in” approach to this construct. Many educational initiatives that do not last, lack the unilateral support and integration that SEL has already achieved. With SEL emerging in the mid-1990s, it has already stood the test of time and with the increased challenges students and society are facing, it is highly unlikely that SEL will disappear. Further, the skill-based approach of SEL positions it as an objective addition to any curricular subject matter, supporting relevance for entire school ecosystems.

Could SEL ignore inequality caused by structural aspects (poverty, racism, etc.)?

The SEL component of social-awareness combats this very concern. Through the development of empathy and an appreciation of diversity, SEL instruction directly confronts and teaches skills to address these societal inequities and issues of privilege.

Could SEL be used to assess school or teacher quality inappropriately?

This concern was addressed by many authors in this issue highlighting the necessity for attention at all levels (Eddy et al.; Halverson & Lashley; Hellman & Milling; Kapalka Richerme; Omasa, et al.). Any educational strategy or initiative could be misused for this purpose. With inequities in resources becoming more evident now than ever, varying results from SEL should be expected; however, many schools (Chicago Public Schools, for example) with unequal levels of resources have seen massive increases in school connectedness, increased attendance and graduation rates, and in the arts, participation increase. All of these are elements traditionally used to assess schools and teachers and SEL presents a construct to help improve these results. Further, ensuring that instruction and assessment are arts-based will help position teachers to enhance their instruction, rather than being assessed on an extra-artistic element.

Conclusion: SEL, arts education, and COVID-19

This special focus issue was written before the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors were able to add some context; however, the conclusions the authors developed would have been affected by this universal

trauma. One of the most urgent elements for arts education emerging from the pandemic is the imperative need to advocate for arts education amidst a massive educational shift with limited and dwindling resources. SEL has emerged as one of the primary arguments for arts education in schools (Edgar & Morrison, 2020). SEL was already emerging as a priority area for our school administrators before the pandemic. This was made more urgent by the increases in school shootings, student stress over academic pressure, and the very tragic increase in youth suicide rates. With the trauma created for our students through the impact of COVID-19 the sense of urgency for school administrators has only increased. As we further come to understand the connection between the arts and SEL, it is clear that SEL-centered arts education advocacy is imperative during this period of rapid education transformation and into the future.

Every major educational evolution that has occurred has been accompanied by advocacy for the role of arts education during these transitions. Since before World War II, despite the arts presence in schools for more than a century prior, the arts have had to work to maintain its rightful place as part of the basic education of all students. Pedagogical adaptation in all arts content areas will be necessary as we emerge post-pandemic necessitating less focus on artistic performance/product and more on creating, responding, and connecting (Omasta, et al., this issue). This flexibility, melded with increased attention to students' mental health will be paramount. Students' safety, physically, socially, and emotionally, will be the driving force for many decisions being made by schools, districts, and states.

Compelling arguments utilizing Social Emotional Learning gleaned from the findings in this issue, include:

- Purposeful integration of SEL into arts education will enrich the students' personal connection to the arts.
 - The relationship built between teachers and students over multiple years of instruction fosters the caring environment necessary to help build school connectedness and foster empathy.
 - The perseverance needed to dedicate oneself to artistic excellence fosters resilience, both in and out of the arts classroom.
 - Artistic creation fosters self-awareness and allows students to develop a greater sense of autonomy and emotional vocabulary.
- The collaborative community developed in the arts classroom around art-making welcomes discussions and awareness of acceptance and embracing diversity.
 - Artists learn the necessity of personal goal-setting, self-assessment, and accountability as they develop high standards for themselves and their art.
 - Art is a cultural necessity and is fundamental to being human. Arts education and SEL exposes and deepens this for a cross-section of the student body.

Dale Schmid (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, President; New Jersey Visual & Performing Arts, Coordinator) suggests the arts can help in powerful and unique ways:

The arts education community can help bridge the gap between educational theory and practice by providing specific ways in which students can increase their SEL competencies through engagement with art-making, stemming from standards-based practice concomitant to instruction as opposed to in addition to instruction. Pointing out the natural intersections between the arts and SEL, and identifying specific opportunities to concurrently align SEL competencies with the process, artmaking may provide insight into ways in which instruction in non-arts disciplines can also foster the development of SEL competency in an intentional and thoughtful manner. The arts community can serve as a catalyst for informed dialogue about practical ways in which schools can use SEL.

This issue represents one of the first objective, collaborative pieces addressing SEL across all arts content areas in diverse areas of policy. The results justify further investigation into the congruence of the arts and SEL, exploring examples of SEL instruction in the arts, and the development of consistent messages for arts education utilizing SEL. The role of SEL in arts education is still being discovered; however, the support of how the arts are a proper environment for SEL is only growing: "The relevant question is not if an arts practice will affect a social-emotional competency, but how it will happen and what arts educators can do to improve the odds that the impact is positive" (Farrington et al., 2019, p.18).

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