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Setting the stage for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) policy and the arts

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ABSTRACT

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), like the arts, has accompanied human life throughout its existence. SEL refers to our capacity to recognize emotions in ourselves and others and manage them appropriately, be organized and set goals, solve problems and make decisions effectively, establish positive and productive relationships with others, and handle challenging situations capably. This issue is organized from broad, first addressing national policy, to specialized, surveying practitioner local-level implementation. Instead of dividing articles based upon arts content area (dance, media arts, music, theatre, dance), the articles are organized by the level of policy, addressing each art content area within each level. This issue should be read as a collective work highlighting the varied levels of explicit connection and the potential for a much more robust connection between arts education and Social Emotional Learning.

KEYWORDS

Social Emotional Learning; arts education; SEL

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), like the arts, has accompanied human life throughout its existence. SEL refers to our capacity to recognize emotions in ourselves and others and manage them appropriately, be organized and set goals, solve problems and make decisions effectively, establish positive and productive relationships with others, and handle challenging situations capably. Now referred to as the Collaborative for Academic, Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) 5 skills, these competencies develop from birth, grow and change with our experiences and development (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional), and influence everything we do (Durlak et al., 2015; Elias et al., 1997).

In recent years, SEL's prominence in education has grown significantly due to:

- Proliferation of data showing the positive impact of well-implemented, multiyear, systematic SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011, 2015).
- Advances in the science of learning and development showing the role of a positive school climate and student engagement and voice in learning and retention (Cantor et al., 2018).
- The work of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning in defining best practices and appropriate SEL policies (www.nationathope.org).

- CASEL's Collaborating States Initiative, leading to 40 states (at the time of publication) working actively on adopting standards or mandates for SEL, character education, and/or positive school culture and climate (<https://casel.org/csi-resources/>; Dusenbury et al., 2015).
- The Academy for SEL in Schools, which offers online, hybrid certificate programs in Social Emotional and Character Development Instruction and School Leadership leading to membership in an ongoing worldwide Virtual Professional Learning Community (SELinSchools.org).
- The creation of the Social Emotional Learning Alliance for the United States, a national organization of affiliated state organizations focused on grass roots advocacy for SEL-related efforts in education, as well as professional development and implementation supports (www.SEL4US.org and state affiliates, e.g., SEL4PA, SEL4CA, SEL4MA, SEL4NJ, SEL4WA, SEL4TX).

The research has been compelling. Multiyear school interventions related to SEL have reported significant student gains in SEL, attitudes, positive social behaviors, and significant decreases in emotional and behavioral problems, improved teacher satisfaction, and 11% increases in academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017). The

explicit recognition that sense of purpose and other positive virtues are part of SEL has been a relatively recent development supporting the value of SEL (Elias, 2014). While the research base is less robust for children in low income, urban settings (Rowe & Trickett, 2017), the data compiled over hundreds of studies are equally compelling. This empirical consistency has been aided by the codification of what it means to implement SEL-related approaches effectively.

SEL and the arts

In a series of interviews on SEL and the arts in 2009, the Greater Good Science Center helped make a strong case for convergence: “We need the arts because they remind children that their emotions are equally worthy of respect and expression. The arts introduce children to connectivity, engagement, and allow a sense of identification with, and responsibility for, others” (Jessica Hoffman Davis). Artistic expression embodies the expression of emotion, aspiration, relationships, regrets, values, imagination, and concerns. Individuals create art in various media, but the common denominator is that the arts come from people and from the context of their experiences.

Consider the artistic processes defining the National Core Arts Standards: Creating, Performing/Presenting/Producing, Responding, and Connecting. Educators at ArtsEd New Jersey have illustrated how SEL connects to these processes: “The creative ideas, concepts, and feelings that influence artists’ work emerge from a variety of sources. One’s feelings, thoughts, personal traits, strengths and limitations influence the creative process.” One’s feelings vocabulary, one’s ability to discern nuanced feelings in others, to understand situations, to have a sense of the flow of history and context, to manage one’s own emotions, to look realistically at one’s strengths and limitations, to engage in and process a variety of relationships, and to be able to focus one’s energies for sustained problem solving and overcoming setbacks all influence each and every one of the artistic processes.

The pedagogy of SEL

For those engaging in arts instruction, the instructional strategies that have worked to build SEL skills in students will also support the integration of SEL into the four artistic processes. In the compilation below (Elias & Kress, 2020), one can substitute “SEL skill” or “artistic skill and process” for the word, “skill” as they

SEL Skills Attune Students for Success in Activities Across All of the Arts:
Creating, Performing/Presenting, Responding, Connecting

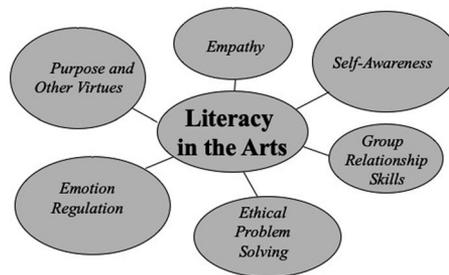


Figure 1. Literacy in the arts.

are synonymously effective. These skills represent the intersections of SEL and arts education capitalizing on well-established arts pedagogy strategies:

- Naming: Establish terminology to serve as a shorthand for the skill or set of skills.
- Building motivation: Work with students to understand why these skills could be helpful in their everyday lives.
- Modeling: Show students how to use the skill in professional or personal life (to the extent comfortable).
- Prompting and Cueing Concepts and Skills Learned Previously: Remind students to use skills by creating visual and verbal signals; the more they practice skills, the more they become internalized.
- Pedagogy for Generalizing Skills:
 - Review: Review prior activities for the students who were present, those who were absent, and those who were present but not fully attentive.
 - Repetition: Repetition helps students find out how to flexibly apply the skill in many circumstances.
 - Anticipate Use: Highlight an upcoming opportunity to use new skills, remind students in advance that it will help them to use the skill.
 - Visual Reminders: Place (student-made) posters, signs, and reminders of SEL themes and skills in classrooms, guidance offices, group rooms, the main office, on bulletin boards.
 - Testimonials: Create opportunities for students to share examples of times they have used skills (or could have used them to good advantage if they would have remembered to do so).
 - Reinforcement: Students are especially attuned to appreciation, both from adults and from peers. When students “live” the SEL themes, let them know they were noticed.

- Reflection: Opportunities for reflection via discussion, journaling, etc. build a habit of thoughtfulness.

While arts educators cannot be solely responsible for teaching SEL any more than they can for teaching any other non-artistic skill, it is essential for arts educators to understand SEL and how to evoke it in the context of artistic work. This process is illustrated in [Figure 1](#). If it is assumed that SEL attunes students to success in activities across all artistic processes and media, then making the appropriate connections to SEL and related domains in arts instruction (and particularly the role and procedures of those individuals who created the arts being studied) becomes integral to arts education.

Policies, practices, and interpretations

One challenge the authors faced writing for this issue was adapting an emerging social science construct for an established humanist field. While all authors utilized a common definition of SEL and approached their work empirically, a broad range of methodologies, voices, and tone was embraced. Narratives, content analyses, and case studies were approaches these authors have chosen to discover intersections between SEL and the arts. Many arts teachers believe they are already implementing a socially- and emotionally-rich education. The touted benefits of arts education, such as creativity, collaboration, and self-discovery are certainly congruent with SEL; however, without intentionality, consistency, and sequence, relying on natural occurrences in arts education is not enough to capitalize on the potential of artistic SEL. The critical, empirical, and purposeful approach the authors in this issue employed represents the rigor needed to advance the intrinsic social and emotional benefits of the arts classrooms.

While research, policy (school, district, state, and national), and implementation of SEL is widespread, the content-specific contextualization for the arts remains disconnected. One of the primary challenges of creating this issue was finding the researchers, teachers, and artists implementing SEL in the arts. To streamline the analysis and policy connections between SEL and the arts, all authors have approached their work utilizing CASEL's definitions and the SEL Learning Standards created for the state of Illinois (www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PDF-7-Illinois-SEL-Standards.pdf). Few formal connections between SEL and the arts currently exist (a list of

some of these resources can be found below). This issue was guided by a vision to comb existing arts and educational policy for both explicit and implicit congruences. Further, many authors chose to envision what direct, explicit connections could be.

This issue is organized from broad, first addressing national policy, to specialized, surveying practitioner local-level implementation. Instead of dividing articles based upon arts content area (dance, media arts, music, theater, dance), the articles are organized by the level of policy, addressing each art content area within each level.

- While there have been advances in SEL policy at the state level, there is currently no national policy in the United States for SEL. Lauren Kapalka Richerme analyzed the 2015 Obama-administration education policy, the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, for intersections with SEL. Kapalka Richerme further evaluated this act and extrapolated what federal SEL/arts policy could be.
- As noted above, the activities involved in arts literacy have a strong connection to SEL. In 2014, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards released a set of standards for dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual art. Matt Omasta led a team (Stephanie Milling and Rebecca Lewis, dance; Amy Petterson Jensen, media arts; Johanna Siebert, music; Beth Murray, theater; and Mark Graham, visual arts) of researchers on a content analysis of the NCAS evaluating crossroads between the standards and SEL.
- Preparing arts teachers to incorporate SEL into their classrooms begins with their own personal experiences and in their undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Daniel Hellman and Stephanie Milling investigated the current implementation of SEL in arts teacher education standards and programs in two states, looking at accreditation organization requirements, institution documents, and course syllabi for how SEL is currently implemented in arts teacher education.
- While widespread arts/SEL implementation is still evolving, several models for assessment and measurement have emerged. Erica Halverson and Yorel Lashley present strategies for assessing SEL artistically.
- Local-level arts/SEL implementation has emerged on different levels nationwide. Martha Eddy organized the narratives of some of these programs through the lens of broad SEL core competencies and movement. These implementations come from

a K-12 classroom (Adam Gohr); teacher preparation (Carolina Blatt-Gross); a professional performance company (Kathryn Humphreys and Louanne Smolin); and university collaborations (Erica Halverson).

- This issue concludes with a vision for what arts-based SEL policy could look like and why this is important for the future of arts education. The voices of Michael Blakeslee, National Association for Music Education (NAfME) executive director and Bob Morrison, Quadrant Research CEO, and Dale Schmid, State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education (SEADAE) president, are included. Additionally, as this issue emerged during the COVID-19 Pandemic, additional attention to contextualizing this issue amidst this trauma and utilizing SEL as arts education advocacy is included.

While the articles do reflect a broad-to-narrow scope of SEL and arts education policy, the articles do interact and complement each other. For example, the Hellman and Milling article on teacher preparation intersects with the Omasta, et al. article on the National Core Arts Standards. This issue should be read as a collective work highlighting the varied levels of explicit connection and the potential for a much more robust connection between arts education and Social Emotional Learning.

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Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards

Goal 1-Self: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success. Learning Standards:

- Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior.
- Recognize personal qualities and external supports.
- Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.

Goal 2-Others: Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships. Learning Standards:

- Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.
- Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.

- Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.
- Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.

Goal 3-Responsible Decisions: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts. Learning Standards:

- Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.
- Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.
- Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.