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## Social emotional learning and the national core arts standards: a cross-disciplinary analysis of policy and practices

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### ABSTRACT

Arts education advocates sometimes point to extrinsic benefits of arts learning, including Social Emotional Learning (SEL). This study considers if and how the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) in dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual art may align with SEL standards adopted by the state of Illinois, upon which other SEL standards have been modeled. A team of arts education experts coded 15,500 intersections of arts standards & SEL goals. They found a great deal of indirect alignment between the NCAS and SEL objectives, but direct alignment was rare. As the types and degrees of alignment varied by discipline, broad discussions of “arts education” that assume similar types of SEL happens in similar ways in all arts disciplines are problematic. 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. From a theoretical, standards-based perspective it seems unlikely that SEL will automatically take place in arts learning scenarios without deliberate planning. While recognizing the potential for deliberately structured lessons to promote both arts learning and SEL, the authors caution against advocating for arts education programs primarily on the basis of presumed extrinsic benefits such as SEL.

### KEYWORDS

Arts Standards; Social Emotional Learning; National Core Arts Standards

### Background

Students who study the arts reap a variety of intrinsic benefits, such as esthetic pleasure, captivation, and artistic competence (McCarthy et al., 2005). Over the past several decades, however, some arts education advocates have also pointed to what appear to be extrinsic or instrumental benefits of engaging in arts learning such as academic performance in non-arts courses and inter/intrapersonal skills (Heath, Soep, & Roach, 1998). The title of Catterall’s (2009) report on a twelve-year study of visual and performing arts education, *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art*, exemplifies the emphasis sometimes placed on non-arts outcomes such as academic achievement and personal development. While the authors of this study do not advocate justifying arts education programs solely on the basis of their extrinsic benefits, we do assert that the reported links between arts learning and

inter-/intra-personal development deserve closer examination. This current study considers if and how educational standards in the arts disciplines and in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) may align.

The National Commission for Social, Emotional, and Academic Development posits that “children learn best when we treat them as human beings, with social and emotional as well as academic needs” (Aspen Institute, n.d., p. 1). Specifically,

They require skills such as paying attention, setting goals, collaboration, and planning for the future. They require attitudes such as internal motivation, perseverance, and a sense of purpose. They require values such as responsibility, honesty, and integrity. They require abilities to think critically, consider diverse views, and problem solve. (Aspen Institute, n.d., p. 1)

Similarly, Farrington et al. (2019) note, “In a country that is both rich in diversity and deeply divided

socially and politically, with stark and widening economic inequality, many are calling upon schools to teach empathy, social responsibility, civic engagement, and the skills to communicate with another across differences” (p. 6).

The National Conference of State Legislatures (2018) defines this “wide range of skills, attitudes, and behaviors that can affect a student’s success in school and life” as SEL. At the state level, US political policymakers have advocated for SEL in schools in increasingly formal ways; as of 2019 the fifty US states have all adopted SEL competencies or standards for pre-school students, with some also developing K-12 standards (Hanover Research, 2019). Some states and districts such as New Jersey and Fargo, ND, have developed standards expressly combining arts learning and SEL.

The language that SEL advocates and researchers employ often resembles the rhetoric used to discuss arts education advocacy.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some posit that the development of social emotional skills is intrinsic to many arts education practices. The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) (2004) states,

Arts learning experiences engage a set of competencies that define and can influence a child’s relationship with others, including peers, teachers, and family. [...] When children work collaboratively in an arts learning experience, they may learn to respect differing viewpoints, take alternative perspectives, listen to others, compromise, and harness their collective skills in service of an overall artistic vision. (p. 13)

The AEP has called for further research into the intersections between arts learning and student self-identity, persistence, resilience, and social skills. Advocates and researchers often seem to operate under the *a priori* assumption that SEL “happens” when students engage in arts education.

Indeed, research in the fields of dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts has long pointed to these disciplines’ ability to foster SEL, though not always using and sometimes pre-dating its current acronym. For example, students with learning disabilities who participated in creative drama classes increased their social skills, including courtesy, self-control, focus, and social compliance, when compared to a control group (de la Cruz, 1995). Students who collaboratively created operas increased skills such as collaboration, turn-taking, and question-asking with the ability to build on what others offered (Wolf, 1999). A study in which at-risk youth participated in guitar training and repeated performances saw increases in music

self-efficacy and self-esteem (Kennedy, 1998). When incarcerated middle-school students participated in regular dance instruction they made gains in confidence, tolerance, and persistence (Ross, 2000). Deasy’s (2002) *Critical Links* is a compendium of arts education research reports that includes many studies demonstrating SEL learning in arts classrooms and programs. These studies lend credence to the notion that SEL sometimes happens during arts learning, but each is specific to a particular population and context; it is not clear that SEL always or often occurs in arts classrooms.

Research demonstrates that arts education sometimes involves social, cognitive, and affective dimensions linked to SEL, but many questions remain as to how these elements interact. “Current studies of the roles of the arts in cognitive and social development do not unpack the learning processes in the arts that could account for transfer either in fine detail or within comprehensive cognitive models” (AEP, 2004, p. 7). While experimental and quasi-experimental studies have identified differences between students engaged in arts education interventions and control groups who were not, “such studies typically do not contribute to an understanding of how variations in learning in the arts relate to variation in the outcomes under investigation” (AEP, 2004, p. 7). If arts learning and SEL sometimes correlate, there is a need to understand *why* this may be the case. It may be that these learning areas share similar goals, so we explored this hypothesis by analyzing the policy documents that outline what students should know and be able to do: state-adopted, nationally-created educational standards.<sup>2</sup>

Soland et al. (2019) note that SEL can be assessed as a nonacademic indicator in states’ accountability programs under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015,<sup>3</sup> but note that “despite the new-found emphasis on SEL, there are often insufficient measures to assess student progress and evaluate programs on SEL-related constructs” (p. 466). While Soland et al. (2019) call for establishing empirical methodologies for assessing SEL, their work points to a need to establish theoretically the ways in which arts education practices may sometimes align with SEL practices. Farrington et al. (2019) posit a theory of action that arts education processes consist of small-scale art practices, each of which include social emotional components. One way to identify these practices is to review the educational standards that outline what students learn in both the artistic and social emotional domains. This study does so by considering

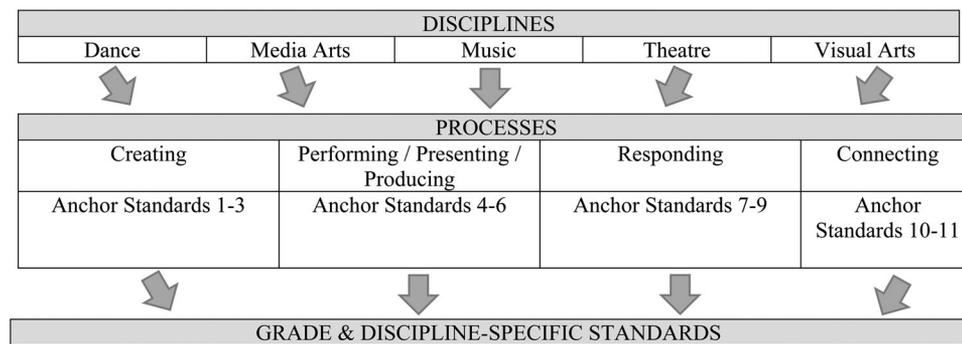


Figure 1. NCAS Framework.

alignment between the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) and SEL standards developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

### **The National Core Arts Standards**

Historically, arts standards have functioned as policy documents with varied audiences and purposes. Audiences include teachers and school administrators, who may turn to them as a resource for determining what their students need to know and be able to do. Additionally, arts standards and SEL standards lay policy foundations by defining what their authors and adopters deem important and providing a framework for both arts and SEL advocacy (Sweeny, 2014). Standards in the arts and SEL also serve the political purpose of legitimizing these learning areas in school systems that may have given them little or no attention.

In 2014, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) released revised national standards in the disciplines of dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts. The standards were developed using the Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) framework to “[help] educators throughout the nation work toward common ends by recommending worthy goals for students as they progress—from grade to grade, instructor to instructor, school to school, or community to community” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS), 2014, p. 8). As Figure 1 illustrates, the standards are based on the principle that arts education involves four central processes: Creating; Performing, Presenting, or Producing; Responding; and Connecting. Under each of these processes fall two or three anchor standards (eleven total) that apply to all disciplines, such as, “Refine and complete artistic work” and “Perceive and analyze artistic work.”

Under the anchor standards fall discipline and grade-level specific standards for all grades PreK-8 as well as high school standards at the “proficient,” “accomplished,” and “advanced” levels.

In music exclusively, there are several strands of standards; for the purposes of this analysis we combined them with one exception; we analyzed the “Traditional and Emerging Ensembles” music standards separately given their nature which by design inherently implies associations to interpersonal skills. Also, some music strands differ in that rather than including specific PreK-8 standards for each grade level they present “novice” and “intermediate” standards prior to high school; we treated these as fifth grade and eighth grade standards, respectively, in our analysis.

As of January 2019, these standards had been adopted (in whole or part) by twenty-seven states and the Department of Defense, while an additional ten states were in the process of revising their arts standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS), 2019). The standards are available online at <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>, where readers can also find a document (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS), 2019) that provides the web addresses for the arts standards currently adopted by each state.

### **Social Emotional Learning goals**

The National Conference of State Legislatures (2018) notes that all fifty US states have developed preschool SEL standards. However, only sixteen states have adopted standards at both the preschool and early elementary levels, and only eight (IL, KS, ME, MI, NJ, NV, RI, WV) have adopted preschool and K-12 standards.

As the US currently lacks national SEL standards, we opted to analyze the NCAS’ alignment with the

Goal 1 Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.	Goal 1A Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior.
	Goal 1B Recognize personal qualities and external supports.
	Goal 1C Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.
Goal 2 Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.	Goal 2A Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.
	Goal 2B Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.
	Goal 2C Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.
	Goal 2D Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.
Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.	Goal 3A Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.
	Goal 3B Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.
	Goal 3C Contribute to the well-being of one's school or community.

**Figure 2.** The Illinois SEL Standards (ISBE 2019).

Illinois SEL Standards. These standards were developed and validated by CASEL and have served as a framework that other states such as NJ and OH have adapted when developing their own standards.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Social and Emotional Learning Standards include three overarching goals, indicated in the left-hand column of [Figure 2](#). We refer to these as “macro-level” SEL goals in this article. Ten sub-goals, referred to in this article as meso-level goals, fall under the three primary goals and are indicated in the right-hand column of [Figure 2](#). The IL standards include an additional 602 “performance descriptors” or micro-level goals or standards. To keep the scope of the project manageable we analyzed correlations between the NCAS and the ten meso-level goals. Throughout the remainder of this article we refer to goals only by the goal indicators in [Figure 2](#) (Goal 1 A, Goal 3B, etc.); readers may wish to refer back to [Figure 2](#) when specific goals are mentioned.

Overall, the SEL goals progress along a self-to-world social continuum with early standards focused on self-awareness and self-management, moving toward applying self-regulation in ever-increasing social circles. The universal three macro-goal, ten meso-goal version employed in this research suggests a recursive, spiral (Bruner, 1960) approach rather than a linear progression. Thus, growth in social-emotional

capacities reads as a longitudinal conquest with fruitful repetition embedded.

### Research questions

The questions this study investigated were:

- To what degree and in what ways are the NCAS holistically aligned (or not) with the IL SEL goals?
- To what degree and in what ways are the NCAS for the specific disciplines of dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts aligned (or not) with the IL SEL goals?
- To what degree (if any) is the alignment of standards correlated with student grade levels?
- To what degree (if any) is the alignment of standards correlated with particular artistic processes?

### Methodology

This study’s original purpose was to design an analytic protocol using the principles of interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) to investigate the questions above. The first author created a table consisting of the ten meso-level SEL goals in rows and the 1,550 NCAS in columns, resulting in 15,500 standard/goal intersections to be analyzed. The first author established a tripartite coding scheme for the protocol;

each intersection of arts/SEL standards was to be coded as directly aligned, indirectly aligned, or not aligned.

Intersections were coded as directly aligned if they represented situations in which students completely fulfilling the arts standard would always and necessarily achieve the paired SEL goal. Intersections representing situations in which students completely fulfilling the arts standard would likely achieve a part of the paired SEL goal were coded as indirectly aligned. Intersections representing situations in which there appeared to be no clear relationship between the arts standard and the SEL goal were coded as not aligned.<sup>4</sup> In the end, every arts standard was interpreted and compared to every meso-level SEL goal, resulting in ratings of each pair's degree of alignment.

Given the volume of data (15,500 intersections to code) it was clear that coding needed to be a collaborative effort. Furthermore, given the highly interpretive nature of interpretive content analysis, coders needed expertise in arts pedagogy generally and in each discipline reviewed specifically. The editor of this issue and the first author identified a team of scholars from each field (the co-authors) who coded the intersections of SEL goals with the standards in the disciplines in which they held expertise.

The study's goal was to use the protocol to analyze the data in a rigorous and systematic fashion that would allow for a detailed report indicating the degrees to which the NCAS, and individual disciplines' standards, aligned with SEL goals. The research team carried out the coding as planned, but it became clear in the analysis stage that interrater reliability was a concern, thus limiting our ability to make comparisons between data coded by different researchers. The following sections detail how this challenge may have come about and how the reporting in this article differs from what was originally intended in light of the situation.

### **Researcher subject positioning**

As a research team comprised of artists and arts educators, the authors recognize that we bring particular lenses to the study of the standards in our disciplines. We brought to this project a collective 77 years of experience teaching the arts to PreK-12 students, 70 years working with pre-service educators, and 95 years working as artists in our disciplines. These experiences inform our understanding of arts education in general as well as arts standards and their potential alignment with SEL in particular.

Throughout the project we engaged in reflexivity, examining our own roles in the research project. It is not uncommon for arts education research to be advocacy-oriented, and our roles as arts educators involve advocating for our disciplines. As such, we may have been more likely to notice connections between the NCAS (especially the standards in our own disciplines) and SEL goals than disinterested coders may have been.

At the outset of the project, each author reflected in the first part of the analytic protocol on whether they personally believed that it was important for the NCAS in their discipline to support SEL and, conversely, if SEL goals should support their artistic disciplines. All research team members believed that the artforms at large and/or their standards in particular should and/or do support SEL. Researchers noted the importance of developing inter-/intra-personal skills in both the arts and SEL, and observed that it is important for future arts educators to understand the breadth of the impact their work might have, including indirect impacts arts education may have in relation to students' SEL skills. While we generally remarked on the importance of arts standards supporting SEL goals, our responses tended not to comment on the role SEL plays in supporting artistic development. It is possible that this imbalance influenced the coding process.

We also brought our demographics to the project. Four of the six research team members identify as female while two identify as male, and all six identify as white or Caucasian. These traits, along with shared expertise in arts education and common experiences working in fields that are frequently required to re-justify their existence likely framed the way we coded and analyzed data. The way we interpreted standards as well as what we noted and overlooked throughout coding and analysis grew from our subject positions.

### **Method**

The research team analyzed the NCAS and SEL goals using content analysis, "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts ... to their contexts of use" (Krippendorff, 2019, 24). Specifically, we employed interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Unlike basic content analysis that simply involves counting the presence of key terms in texts, interpretive content analysis recognizes that all texts exist within contexts and requires researchers to consider and analyze "both manifest and latent content" in texts (3). As such, we reviewed

NCAS Standard	SEL Goal	Alignment Type	Rationale
Dance PR.5.1.HSIII.a: Initiate, plan, and direct rehearsals with attention to technical details and fulfilling artistic expression. Use a range of rehearsal strategies to achieve performance excellence	2C: Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others	Direct	Because this dance standard requires students to direct rehearsals with specific goals in mind, students must be able to communicate those goals effectively to others. They must be able to verbalize their observations and provide feedback leading to desired goals. Students must also motivate the dancers to achieve the desired goals, which requires effective social skills.
Dance PR.5.1.3.a: Adjust body-use to coordinate with a partner or other dancers to safely change levels, directions, and pathway designs.	3A: Consider ethical, safety, and society factors in making decisions.	Indirect	The dance standard requires students to move safely through space, thus calling for them to consider safety factors in their decisions about movement. The standard does not, however, require consideration of ethical and societal factors.
Dance Standard RE8.1 HS II: Analyze and discuss how the elements of dance, execution of dance movement principles, and context contribute to artistic expression. Use genre specific dance terminology.	3C: Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.	Not Aligned	This dance standard is not aligned with SEL goals because it does not imply any self-awareness of behavior, use of interpersonal skills in relationships, or decision-making skills in social situations. There is no mention of school or community contexts.

Figure 3. Examples of standard/goal alignment.

the NCAS to identify both explicit references to SEL as well as instances in which SEL goals seemed implicit or tacit. The latter task in particular was highly interpretivist, and as Saldaña and Omasta (2018) note regarding interpretivism, “Researchers bring who they are to the project, balancing their value-laden impressions and emotional responses with the evidentiary necessities of what makes for rigorously investigated work” (p. 142). This, along with the fact that each coder was coding only within her or his discipline may have contributed to the lack of interrater reliability we found during analysis.

Different researchers coded different disciplines’ standards, and an assessment of interrater reliability using Krippendorff’s alpha indicated a low level of reliability was achieved. As such, we advise readers reviewing the data below to make interdisciplinary comparisons only with significant caution. For example, 51% of the standards in one discipline were

coded as directly or indirectly aligned with SEL Goal 1, while only 48% of the standards in another discipline were coded as such. Because the different standards were coded by different researchers, it does not necessarily follow that the first discipline is “more aligned” with Goal 1 than the second discipline. Other coders may not have coded each of the 15,500 intersections exactly as we did; our findings may even have been different even if the same team of researchers coded data in disciplines other than their own. Nevertheless, some trends in the data were so substantive and clear that we can draw warranted assertions about the standards as a whole. Further, comparisons can be made intradisciplinarily (using relative terms), given that the coding *within* each discipline was completed by the same coder. As such, when sharing data below, we present ranges and means when discussing the standards at large and use relative terms to discuss variation within disciplines.

### Coding examples

Drisko & Maschi (2016) note that when conducting interpretative content analyses, researchers must “show their readers how the analysis was completed” (p. 6, emphasis in original). We “show our work” in Figure 3 by giving examples of standard/goal intersections coded as directly aligned, indirectly aligned, and not aligned, along with rationales for attributing those codes.

### Data/findings

#### Overall alignment

*Finding 1: Most of the NCAS were coded as aligned (either directly or indirectly) with at least one of the three macro-level SEL goals.* The percentage of standards coded as aligned ranged from 50%-82% among the disciplines, with mean alignment of 65%.<sup>5</sup> Collectively, the NCAS most aligned with macro SEL Goal 1 (related to intrapersonal skills); alignment with this goal ranged from 11%-51% among the disciplines with a mean of 43%. Alignment with macro Goal 2 (related to interpersonal skills) followed closely; with alignment ranging from 11-74% among the disciplines with a mean of 35%. Collectively the NCAS were coded as least-aligned with Goal 3 (related to decision-making and responsible behavior); with alignment ranging from 8%-61% with a mean of 19%. Few NCAS aligned with all three SEL Goals; the percentage of standards aligned with *all* goals ranged from 0-15% with a mean of 7%. Considering the standards from this perspective suggests strong alignment between the NCAS and SEL goals, but this view may be misleading.

A more modest picture of the standards’ alignment emerges when comparing the NCAS individually to the ten meso-level SEL goals (that is, when considering how each of the 15,550 intersections of arts standards and meso-level SEL goals were coded). The total percentage of standards aligned at this level ranged from 8-27% among the disciplines with a mean of 14%.

*Finding 2: There is very little direct alignment between the NCAS and the meso-level SEL Goals.* The total percentage of arts standards directly aligned with meso-level SEL goals ranged from 0-3% among the disciplines, with a mean of just 1%. Intersections were greater than ten times more likely to be coded as indirectly aligned than directly aligned. Indirect alignment ranged from 5%-26% among the disciplines with mean of 13%. As such, while the observation that 62% of arts standards are aligned with at least one SEL

Goal is a truthful advocacy talking point, mining more detailed analyses presents a more nuanced picture.

*Finding 3: When considering the NCAS collectively, there is a positive correlation between the grade level of the standards and the percentage of standards aligned with at least one macro-level goal.* That is, high school arts standards were generally coded as more aligned with SEL goals than elementary arts standards, though this is not the case within all disciplines when they are considered individually, as detailed further below. The percentage of elementary (grades PreK-5) NCAS aligned with at least one SEL Goal ranged from 41%-75% among the disciplines with a mean of 60%. The percentage of middle school (grades 6-8) NCAS aligned ranged from 45-94% among the disciplines with a mean of 70%. Finally, the percentage of high school (grades 9-12) NCAS aligned ranged from 54-93% with a mean of 80%. Overall, the most aligned standards are the high school “proficient” standards (the lowest level under “accomplished” and “advanced”); alignment of these standards ranges from 58-94% among the disciplines with a mean of 76% alignment. Thus, it is in introductory-level high school arts courses that students may most likely be taught using arts standards that align with SEL Goals.

*Finding 4: Considering the NCAS (and thus, “the arts”) collectively does not necessarily reflect trends within specific disciplines; a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which “the arts” align with SEL goals emerges when the artforms are analyzed as distinct disciplines.* There is significant variation between the types of SEL goals various disciplines align with, the grade levels at which they most align, and the artistic processes most at play related to SEL. As such, the next section shares data from each discipline. Given concerns about interrater reliability, specific percentages are not reported in these sections, as this could give the false impression that figures from one discipline can be directly compared to another. Rather, all data is discussed in relative terms.

#### Discipline-specific alignment

##### Dance

The majority of dance standards coded as aligned with SEL Goals aligned with SEL Goal 1 (intrapersonal skills), while only a few were coded as aligned with SEL Goal 3 (decision-making and responsible behavior). Dance standards were five times more likely to be coded as aligned with Goal 1 than with Goal 3. Standards were also about twice as likely to be

coded as aligned with Goal 2 (interpersonal skills) than Goal 3.

As with the NCAS at large, very few dance standards were directly aligned with the ten meso-level goals, though this discipline's standards demonstrated the smallest gap between the percentage of standards directly and indirectly aligned. Standards were slightly less than twice as likely to be coded as direct rather than indirect; this gap is far greater in all other disciplines as discussed below.

In terms of artistic processes, the Connecting and Performing standards were most aligned with SEL Goals with relatively little alignment in the Creating and Responding standards. The likelihood of dance standards aligning with SEL Goals was strongly positively correlated with grade level; there was no alignment at the Pre-K level and nearly complete alignment at the high school "advanced" level. Overall dance standards were more than twice as likely to align with SEL Goals at the middle and high school levels than at the elementary level.

### **Media arts**

Aligned standards in media arts were mostly aligned with SEL Goal 2 (interpersonal), followed by Goal 3 (decision-making and responsible behavior). Significantly fewer aligned with Goal 1 (intrapersonal), though there was still a great deal of alignment with this goal. Media arts standards were about one and a half times more likely to align with Goal 2 than Goal 1. Very few media arts standards directly aligned with meso-level SEL goals. Alignment of media arts standards with SEL goals was greater than 25 times more likely to be indirect than direct.

In media arts, the Connecting process standards were most likely to align with SEL goals. Connecting standards were about four times more likely to align with SEL goals than Creating standards, which were the least aligned. The producing standards were about twice as likely to align with SEL goals than the Creating standards, and the Responding standards were about three times as likely to align.

In terms of grade level, the middle school media arts standards were most likely to align with SEL goals, with nearly all of them aligned. Slightly fewer, but still nearly all, high school standards were aligned with SEL goals. Elementary media arts standards were slightly less likely to align with SEL goals.

### **Music**

Relatively few music standards (from both the general music strand and the music ensembles strand) aligned

with SEL Goal 3 (decision-making and responsible behavior), and only slightly more aligned with Goal 2 (interpersonal skills). In both strands the standards were about five times more likely to align with Goal 1 (intrapersonal skills) than with Goals 2 or 3. Almost no music standards (from either strand) were directly aligned with SEL goals; standards were about ten times more likely to align with SEL goals indirectly.

When considering the artistic processes of the music standards, the Responding standards were most likely to align with SEL goals in both strands. However, there was some deviation between the strands. Among the general music standards, the alignment of the Performing standards followed closely behind the Responding standards, followed by a considerable drop to the Creating and Connecting standards, which were least aligned. Among the music-ensembles standards, the second most aligned standards were those from the Connecting process, followed by the Performing Standards and finally the Creating standards, which were least aligned.

The percentage of music-ensembles standards aligned with SEL goals at each grade level was positively correlated with grade level, with a great majority of high school standards aligned, followed by middle school and then elementary-level standards. The general music standards were also most aligned at the high school level, with a significant drop moving to the elementary school level, which was very closely followed by the middle school level.

### **Theater**

Of the theater standards aligned with SEL goals, the great majority were aligned with Goal 2 (interpersonal skills); theater standards were roughly five times more likely to align with these goals than they were to align with Goal 1 (intrapersonal skills) or Goal 3 (decision-making and responsible behavior). Almost no theater standards were directly aligned with SEL goals; standards were ten times more likely to align indirectly.

In terms of artistic processes, the Connecting theater standards were most aligned with SEL goals, followed by the Responding standards, then the Creating standards, and finally the Performing standards, which were least aligned. Theater is the only discipline in which elementary-level standards were most likely to align with SEL goals, followed by high school standards and middle school standards.

### **Visual arts**

Most of the visual arts standards that aligned with SEL goals aligned with Goal 2 (interpersonal skills)

followed closely by those aligning with Goal 1 (intra-personal skills) and then a significant drop to Goal 3 (decision-making and responsible behaviors) standards. As in many disciplines, nearly none of the visual arts standards directly aligned with SEL goals; visual arts standards were nearly twenty times more likely to be indirectly aligned.

Visual arts was the only discipline in which the Creating process standards were most aligned with SEL goals. The Presenting standards were least aligned. The Responding standards were about twice as likely to align with SEL goals than the Presenting Standards. The Connecting standards were about three times more likely to align, with the Creating standards about four times more likely to align. There was a positive correlation between the percentage of visual arts standards aligned with SEL goals and the grade level of those standards, with a considerable percentage of elementary-level standards aligned, a greater percentage of middle school standards aligned, and most high school standards aligned.

## Discussion

As a whole, most of the NCAS align indirectly with at least one SEL goal, but very few standards align directly. As such, there is no standards-based theoretical foundation to support the idea that students taking arts classes will automatically develop SEL competencies simply by engaging in arts learning. Rather, educators hoping to increase student learning in both the arts and SEL simultaneously must make conscious efforts to ensure explicitly address both of these learning areas. The substantial amount of indirect NCAS/SEL alignment suggests that educators might readily create units that address both the arts and SEL, but in most cases such lessons need to be deliberate and carefully planned in order to be effective; our review of the standards suggests that without this conscious effort educators are unlikely to create lessons that help students achieve both arts and SEL goals.

### Disciplinary heterogeneity

The type and degree of alignment between the arts standards and SEL goals is not uniform across disciplines. Rather, particular disciplines' standards align variously with particular and differing SEL goals at particular and differing grade levels through particular and differing artistic processes (Creating, Performing/Presenting/Producing, Responding, and Connecting). As such, educators interested in promoting both arts

learning and SEL should carefully consider the relative alignment of standards from the various arts disciplines with SEL objectives. While we do not suggest that particular disciplines are "more aligned" with SEL than others, we do note the relative alignment within disciplines between different artforms and the various SEL goals, standards for different grade levels, and various artistic processes in a way that allows for theorizing what specific standards might be most effective. Rather than considering the potential impact of "the arts" at large, a close examination of each individual artform is merited.

### Practical implications

Following are three hypothetical scenarios educators might face along with discussion of how this study's findings might guide their thinking.

*Scenario A: A visual arts teacher seeks to design lessons that incorporate art and SEL and needs to decide what type of lessons might be most suited to this task.* The NCAS visual arts standards for the Creating process are greater than four times more likely to align with SEL goals than the Presenting process standards. As such, the teacher may wish to turn first to the Creating standards when choosing the standards to address in the lesson.

*Scenario B: A district superintendent interested in promoting student SEL is able to diversify the arts offerings in her district by hiring two new teachers: one in dance and one in theater. She must decide at what level schools to place these teachers.* The dance and theater standards are inversely correlated in terms of percentage of alignment by grade level: the dance standards align with SEL goals more than twice as often at the middle school and high school levels than they do at the elementary level. Considering this, the superintendent may wish to place the dance teacher at a middle or high school. Theater, on the other hand, is the only discipline in which the standards are most aligned with SEL objectives at the elementary level, suggesting that the superintendent may wish to place the theater teacher at an elementary school. In this way, both teachers would be working with the most-aligned grade levels in their disciplines. While they would still need to consciously combine the arts and SEL, they have a greater number of directly and indirectly aligned standards to work with at these levels. While we do not recommend administrators place strong emphasis on disciplines' relative alignment with SEL goals, this is one factor among many that could be considered.

*Scenario C: An elementary school classroom teacher wants to create an arts lesson that also promotes his students' interpersonal skills and needs to decide which artform to teach.* This scenario is challenging, as this study cannot compare the percentage of standards from each discipline that align with SEL Goal 2, which considers interpersonal skills. It does, however, indicate the relative degree to which the standards for each discipline align with the three macro-level SEL Goals. The theater standards, for example, are five times more likely to align with SEL Goal 2 than they are Goal 1 or 3, suggesting that the teacher may wish to consider a theater unit. The general music standards, on the other hand, are most aligned with SEL Goal 1 (intrapersonal skills); the standards in this discipline are five times *less* likely to align with Goal 2 than with Goal 1. Therefore, while the general music standards sometimes align with Goal 2, a music unit may be much more suited to developing intrapersonal skills than interpersonal skills.

### **Tacit alignment**

In some instances, arts instruction may align with SEL goals in ways not explicit in the NCAS. For example, SEL Goals 2A and 2C require students to recognize the feelings and perspectives of others when working with others in collaborative situations. Also, students need to be able to communicate effectively with others in collaborative situations where they are either creating dances with other students or running rehearsals. For example, if students work together while creating writing, improvising, composing, or choreographing, the students will need to consider each other's ideas and communicate effectively in providing direction. These are common expectations among arts teachers, but they are not always explicitly stated in the NCAS as they are in the SEL goals.

The NCAS also include many specific disciplinary skills, such as compare and contrast, analyze, make, curate, identify and explain, evaluate, reflect, create, revise, elaborate, document, describe, design, select, and organize. Although none of these skills correspond directly to SEL goals, the development and refinement of these skills can contribute to developing a student's self-awareness and capability in the contexts of school and life accomplishment. Although these do not directly address issues of self-management and self-discipline, they provide many ways for students to develop SEL competencies through the

practices associated with creative work (Farrington et al., 2019).

### **Terminological tensions**

While the SEL goals maintain a consistent focus on the always-identifiable individuals (i.e., students) in an ever-growing world, the NCAS move between individual, ensemble, and sometimes undefined agents of action. Additionally, while words like "cooperate" and "character" pivot easily between both SEL and arts contexts, words like "conflict" and "tension" do not. These terms represent things to be corrected and addressed in the SEL goals, yet they are viewed as productive artistic elements in some arts standards, particularly secondary school theater. For example, "conflict" is something to be "prevented" and "managed" in the SEL standards (Goal 2D), but developing and exploring conflict in role as characters is essential to most theater and drama work, whether process or product oriented, at all grade levels. In some cases the arts standards call for more nuanced interpretation of vocabulary than the SEL standards.

### **Policy implications**

#### **Need for further investigation**

The NCAS and IL SEL standards each value student progress and learning. Students would be better served if educators and policy makers clearly saw the ways in which these two sets of policy can be compatible. Those invested in strengthening students' social and emotional capacities along with their capacities as artists might *invest in further research that considers the development of a crosswalk between the SEL objectives and the arts standards.* Organizations such as ArtsEd New Jersey have begun undertakings of this nature, as discussed in the concluding article to this issue.

### **Recognizing individual artforms**

Educational leaders seeking to promote SEL should consider that the arts disciplines align variously with SEL goals and consult research to determine the most effective interventions. For example, based on this analysis the dance and music standards are most aligned with intrapersonal SEL goals while media arts, theater, and visual arts standards are most aligned with interpersonal SEL goals. The greatest degree of alignment between NCAS and SEL goals occurs at the elementary school level in theater, the middle school

level in media arts, and the high school level in dance, music, and visual arts. While our analysis does not suggest that one artform is more effective than another at promoting SEL, it does allow for ordinal ranking within artforms. *Education leaders should carefully assess the alignment between various disciplines in terms of types of SEL to be promoted and grade level differences rather than assuming that all arts education experiences are equally valuable in terms of promoting SEL in varying contexts.*

### **Standards as policy**

Federal, state, and local mandates and recommendations for various disciplines are upheld and carried out uniformly by appropriate agencies (e.g., state education departments, local education agencies [LEAs], building administrators). When such agencies adopt content standards, as seen with the Common Core State Standards in language arts and mathematics, expectations and supports for instruction, staffing, student learning, and assessment may be developed and implemented to promote their teaching.

This has not often been the case with the adoption and implementation of the NCAS. These standards were designed to account for the recommended range and depth of student learning across multiple artistic disciplines, sequential outcomes, and developmentally appropriate practices. For the NCAS (or any standards) to more broadly affect policy, they need to become state mandates so that their goals, content, instruction, and value are understood, monitored, provided for, and upheld in areas of adequate staffing, professional development, student access, materials, and facilities. Further, as we have identified, each arts discipline makes unique contributions in terms of SEL. As such, *we recommend that states and LEAs adopt current and relevant standards in all five arts disciplines and provide the instructional staffing and other supports necessary to ensure that all students have equitable access to comprehensive instruction in the arts.*

### **Explicating connections**

Many arts practitioners may read the SEL Goals and think that SEL is an unstated but prominent feature of all arts education endeavors. That is, there may be a sense that “we’re already doing that.” Yet this analysis reveals that on paper the alignment is less clear, suggesting that future arts standards writing teams might wish to more explicitly evidence connections to

SEL, as has begun in some districts and states. At the same time, some might argue that explicating SEL’s role detracts from the complex ways the arts operate within and among human beings. As such, *standards writing teams should carefully consider the degree to which explicating SEL’s often assumed embeddedness in the arts may benefit and detract from arts education, perhaps conducting research to determine how educators respond to proposed standards, and make a conscious choice to explicate (or not) connections between the arts and SEL.*

### **Disciplinary equity**

Because standards demarcate expectations for students and teachers and help administrators assess student and teacher performance in disciplines, they have tremendous policy power. Presently, however, the NCAS are not constructed to support teacher development, spark administrative imagination, and share risk toward innovation. Arts standards came into being as an act of advocacy for curricular attention to the arts, to point to their legitimacy within the school system, particularly in the case of less-prevalent disciplines such as theater and dance.<sup>6</sup> While there is promise in exploiting the fruitful synergy between SEL and arts learning, there is also risk of the arts taking on another layer of compliance without being on equal footing. Therefore, *we recommend that educational leaders recognize the intrinsic value of the arts disciplines and adopt arts standards as mandates in ways that ensure they are not included solely in service of non-arts goals such as promoting SEL.*

### **Future research**

Our study raises a number of questions for further research consideration. Future studies might describe arts-based approaches to SEL in practice. How do various art forms operationalize identity and agency, emotion, social skills and ethical responsibility, empathy, communication in arts learning? How would this look in a variety of settings? What might it afford students?

Descriptive studies—perhaps collaboratively executed by arts and SEL researchers—of how arts pedagogical practices impact social and emotional competencies and social contexts would help both fields see one another’s work beyond written standards. Such studies might consider teachers’ actual practices, which may differ significantly from what standards suggest is taking place in classrooms. Such

data would be informative in illuminating levels of deliberate practices and occasions for more inclusive teaching and learning.

Teacher intention appears to be a critical element in promoting social and emotional growth (Farrington et al., 2019) as well as arts learning. As such, both fields might benefit from pointed interview-based and/or survey research regarding the intersection of intention and action in the spaces between arts and SEL.

Additionally, historical investigation could prove fruitful for future practice. How have arts standards been composed in the past and how have they sought to link SEL and the arts (or not)? How might they be conceived, used, and revised in conversation with practice moving forward?

## Notes

1. Contemporary movements to promote SEL in schools resemble efforts to promote arts education when the first national arts standards were drafted in the late twentieth century. In both cases, national advocacy organizations developed educational standards and urged policymakers at the state level to adopt them to ensure a focus on these types of learning.
2. We do not presume that educational standards (in the arts, SEL, or any other area) are perfect documents; they are crafted by humans with biases and varying agendas. Standards are not necessarily always positive or useful. However, the US educational climate is increasingly standards-based, driven by concerns about supposedly mediocre student achievement suggested by reports such as the Reagan administration's *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE 1983). Sleeter & Carmona (2017) among others have pointed to the many challenges associated with a standards-driven curriculum. Ultimately, given standards' weight in contemporary education (deserved or otherwise) it is appropriate and important to examine the expectations these policy documents put forth.
3. See Kapalka Richerme's article in this issue for more information about ESSA, SEL, and the arts.
4. We note that effective teachers, assigned any arts standard and any SEL goal, could create a lesson in which students fulfilled the arts standard (or any standard) and the SEL goal. We did *not* code intersections as aligned if they required caveats (e.g., "these standards *could* both be addressed by a lesson if steps beyond fulfilling the standards themselves were included), such as to create alignment.
5. As interrater reliability was low and interdisciplinary comparison would not be appropriate as discussed earlier, ranges and means are reported in this instance and hereafter. A range of 50-82% and mean of 65% indicates that the discipline that was coded as least aligned found 50% alignment and the discipline that was coded as the most aligned found 82% alignment.
6. The average (mean) of all of five disciplines' alignment was 65%. As such, the overall takeaway is that at least 50% of the intersections were aligned in every discipline, with about 65% alignment when considering the disciplines together.
6. Even with such advocacy, theatre and dance are rarely taught in K-12 US elementary schools. Parsad et al. (2012) report that in 2012 music was taught in 94% of schools and visual art was taught at 83%, however, only 3% offered dance courses and only 4% offered drama/theatre. Similarly, while music was taught at 91% of public US high schools and visual arts was taught at 89%, only 12% of schools offered dance instruction and 45% offered drama/theatre (p. 9).

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