Social and Emotional Learning: A Brief Overview and Issues Relevant to Australia and the Asia-Pacific

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Abstract Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves instructional approaches that endeavour to foster individuals' social and emotional competence and promote classroom and school cultures that are safe, caring, and encourage participation. Over the past two decades, there has been growing interest in schooling that attends not only to students' academic development, but also their social and emotional development. SEL has been recognised as one way to achieve this. The current chapter provides an overview of SEL, including important conceptual underpinnings for the area, key definitions of the five well-accepted social and emotional competencies that are promoted in SEL, and positive student and teacher outcomes associated with effective SEL implementation. The chapter also provides important contextual characteristics relevant to SEL implementation and research in Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of important research implications for the region, as well as for the world more broadly. In sum, it is hoped that this chapter will help to extend awareness of and effective practice in SEL to best promote social and emotional competence and healthy school and community climates.

Keywords Social and emotional learning · Social and emotional competence · Australia · Asia-Pacific · Research implications

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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been growing interest in schooling that attends not only to students' academic development, but also their social and emotional development (Humphrey 2013; Weissberg, et al. 2015). This is based on a growing literature highlighting the links between healthy social and emotional development and important academic and well-being outcomes (e.g. Durlak et al. 2011; Schonfeld et al. 2015; Sklad et al. 2012), as well as much public interest in the need to develop respectful, constructive, and productive citizens (Denham et al. 2016; Oberle et al. 2016; Weissberg et al. 2015). One approach for addressing and attending to social and emotional development is known as social and emotional learning (SEL). The aim of this chapter is to provide a brief overview on the area of SEL—including its conceptual underpinnings, definitions of key social and emotional competencies, and a discussion of positive outcomes associated with effective SEL implementation. Following this, focus is directed specifically to SEL in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, where important contextual characteristics regarding SEL implementation and research are discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion of several important gaps in knowledge that deserve attention from researchers.

2 Overview of SEL

SEL involves instructional approaches, such as direct instruction, modelling, and practice, that endeavour to foster social and emotional competence (Humphrey et al. 2016; Weissberg et al. 2015). Social and emotional competence (SEC) is the mechanism that individuals use to manage their intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions and experiences effectively (Denham 2006; Rose-Krasnor 1997). SEL also encompasses the promotion of positive classroom and school cultures that are safe, caring, and encourage participation (Humphrey 2013; Weissberg et al. 2015; see also Allen et al. 2017 this volume on the links between SEC and school belonging). SEL is thus relevant with respect to individuals' social and emotional development, but also to the social and emotional climate of classrooms and schools (Oberle et al. 2016; Vadeboncoeur and Collie 2013). Although SEL programming is typically directed at promoting students' SEC, increasing attention is being paid to fostering this among teachers as well (e.g. Jennings et al. 2013; Jennings and Greenberg 2009; see also Collie 2017 this volume).

2.1 Conceptual Underpinnings of SEL

In the past few years, several frameworks of SEL have begun to emerge. These have helped to provide important conceptual grounding for the field. The most recent framework is Weissberg et al.'s (2015) model of SEL in educational settings. This model considers the various systematic influences on SEL implementation and outcomes—including at classroom, school, family, community, district/region, state, and national levels.

Classroom-level approaches refer to direct instruction in SEL, embedding SEL throughout the curriculum, and informal infusion of SEL throughout teachers' interactions in the classroom (Weissberg et al. 2015). At the school level, SEL is influenced by policies such as a "fair and equitable" discipline approach, practices such as the creation of norms for respectful interactions among students and teachers (e.g. approaches for anti-bullying), as well as the commitment for SEL by school leadership (including the provision of professional development for teachers and staff; Weissberg et al. 2015). With respect to the family and community, such partnerships provide the opportunity to reinforce the lessons and goals of SEL at home and in the neighbourhood (Weissberg et al. 2015). One form for this is after-school activities that promote youth development (Gullotta 2015). Another example would be parenting programmes such as *Triple P Positive Parenting Program* (Sanders et al. 2000), *The Incredible Years* (Webster-Stratton et al. 2002), *Families Coping: Effective Strategies for You and Your Child* (Frydenberg 2015), and *Parent Management Training* (Pearl 2009). There is an abundance of parenting programmes which incorporate social and emotional skills in the parent–child relationship.

At the jurisdiction level (e.g. district, region), support for SEL is also paramount. This includes commitment for SEL, making resources available, establishing a programming approach for SEL, and creating systems to evaluate and improve SEL approaches applied within schools (Weissberg et al. 2015). At a broader level, state and national government policies and supports also have an influence on SEL programming to the extent that there are SEL-focused learning standards, which highlight what goals and outcomes are expected in SEL among students in different grades (Weissberg et al. 2015). Finally, the model highlights the link between all of these systematic influences on short- and long-term student outcomes such as greater SEC, reduced emotional distress, increased academic performance, increased rates of high school completion, improved mental health, and more engaged citizenship.

Another framework that deserves mention is Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) model of the prosocial classroom. Although this model has several congruencies with the Weissberg et al. (2015) model, it focuses more on the classroom-level influences of SEL. Also important is the model's consideration of the impact of teachers' own SEC and well-being. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) highlight the role that teachers play in promoting effective SEL implementation and creating safe and supportive classroom environments that are essential for students' SEC and

academic development (see also Collie 2017). More precisely, the model highlights that teachers' SEC and well-being are linked with three important classroom-level processes: healthy teacher–student relationships, effective classroom management, and effective implementation of SEL. These classroom processes are, in turn, reciprocally linked with a healthy classroom climate, which leads to positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes among students. Overlaying all these relationships are school and community contextual factors that have an influence in the processes and how they are promoted or thwarted.

Together, these two frameworks highlight the importance of contextual factors in the promotion of SEL, SEC, and ultimately, student outcomes (see also Street 2017 this volume on the importance of context in SEL implementation). Moreover, they highlight the roles played by educators at school, as well as family, community members, administrators, and policy makers beyond school in effective SEL implementation.

2.2 Social and Emotional Competence

As noted above, SEL involves programming and approaches designed to promote individuals' SEC, which is essential for both interpersonal and intrapersonal social and emotional functioning, and is a joint product of the individual and his/her social environment (Rose-Krasnor 1997). There are several different approaches for defining and measuring SEC (e.g. see Denham 2006; Weare and Gray 2003; see also Frydenberg et al. 2017 this volume). One widely applied approach is that by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). According to CASEL (e.g. 2013), there are five social and emotional competencies (SECs). These are defined in turn:

- *Self-awareness* refers to individuals' capacity to understand their emotions, goals, and values; know their strengths and weaknesses; possess a sound sense of confidence and optimism; and hold a positive mindset (CASEL 2013; Weissberg et al. 2015).
- *Self-management* involves individuals' capacity to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviours; delay gratification and control impulses; manage stress; and motivate themselves and persevere through challenges (CASEL 2013; Weissberg et al. 2015).
- *Social awareness* refers to individuals' ability to take others' perspectives (including those from different backgrounds); empathise with and feel compassion for others; understand social norms regarding behaviour; and recognise resources and supports available to them (CASEL 2013; Weissberg et al. 2015).
- *Relationship skills* involve individuals' capacity to listen effectively, communicate clearly, and cooperate with others; negotiate conflict in appropriate and respectful ways; and seek and offer help as needed (CASEL 2013; Weissberg et al. 2015).

- *Responsible decision making* involves individuals' capacity to make respectful and constructive choices concerning their behaviour and social interactions in diverse settings; and consider issues of ethics, safety, and well-being for themselves and others, along with the consequences of actions (CASEL 2013; Weissberg et al. 2015).

Together, the five SECs address a range of social and emotional capacities that are essential for healthy individual development, as well as creating healthy classroom and school climates (CASEL 2013; Oberle et al. 2016; Weissberg et al. 2015).

2.3 Outcomes of Effective SEL

As noted above, effective SEL implementation has been associated with a variety of positive outcomes. Looking first at students, it is perhaps not surprising that SEL programming has been positively associated with enhanced SECs given this is a core focus of SEL (Domitrovich et al. 2007; Durlak et al. 2011; Korpershoek et al. 2016). Another key outcome that has been examined is academic performance with researchers linking SEL with enhancements in this area (Durlak et al. 2011; Korpershoek et al. 2016; Schonfeld et al. 2015). Positive attitudes towards oneself, others, and school (e.g. self-concept, school belonging; Durlak et al. 2011; Sklad et al. 2012) and reduced emotional distress (e.g. depression, anxiety; Durlak et al. 2011; Korpershoek et al. 2016; Schick and Cierpka 2005) are other outcomes that have been linked with effective SEL programming. With respect to behavioural outcomes, effective SEL has been shown to bolster prosocial behaviour (e.g. getting on well with others; Durlak et al. 2011; Sklad et al. 2012) and reduce conduct problems (e.g. disruptive classroom behaviour; Durlak et al. 2011). Although the bulk of studies have examined these positive outcomes shortly following the programme, emerging research is also highlighting longer term effects in school (e.g. greater than 7 months; Sklad et al. 2012) and into adulthood (Goodman et al. 2015).

Turning next to teachers, although the empirical research is limited, researchers are beginning to link teacher-focused SEL programmes to important outcomes for teachers including greater well-being, mindfulness, and self-efficacy for teaching (e.g. Jennings et al. 2013; Roeser et al. 2013; see also Collie 2017). Taken together, there is promising evidence of the importance of effective SEL implementation for both students and teachers.

2.4 Summary

SEL is a growing field that is receiving increasing attention from educators, researchers, and the public in many countries worldwide (Torrente et al. 2015).

Several conceptual frameworks are now available to guide researchers and practitioners in their work in the area. Moreover, there is burgeoning research providing support for the value of effective SEL implementation.

3   SEL in Australia and the Asia-Pacific

Despite the promising work that is being conducted in the area of SEL, the bulk of this has been conducted in the USA and Europe, highlighting the need for wider attention in different regions of the world. In this volume, focus is directed on shedding light on SEL implementation and research in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. There are several important issues to consider regarding SEL within these locations given that SEL is embedded in the cultural context within which it is taught (Hecht and Shin 2015). Below, pertinent points regarding Australia first, followed by the Asia-Pacific region more broadly, are discussed.

3.1   SEL in Australia

Much like the USA and UK, interest in SEL in Australia has gained momentum over the past decade. Indeed, the importance of students' social and emotional development was highlighted in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008), which established that confident and creative individuals: "have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing"; "develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others"; and "relate well to others and form and maintain healthy relationships" (p. 9). These core statements have since been embedded into the Australian National Curriculum under personal and social capability, which highlights four capabilities that align with CASEL's (2013) work: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social management (ACARA, n.d.). As these key policy documents reveal, there is now endorsement at a national level of the importance attending to the social and emotional development of young Australians.

With respect to how SEL is implemented and approached in Australian schools, Humphrey (2013) indicates that this largely occurs via the national government's KidsMatter and MindMatters initiatives. As described by Littlefield et al. (2017 this volume; see also Dobia and Roffey 2017 this volume), the KidsMatter initiatives—developed for early childhood educational settings and primary school—involve four components for addressing SEL: promoting a positive school community, SEL programming for students, working with parents and carers, and helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties. Each component is accompanied by a guide that provides details of effective programmes for addressing the core

components. At the secondary level, the MindMatters framework was developed to promote mental health among adolescents. This initiative involves resources and online tools to help schools to create their own mental health strategy (www. mindmatters.edu.au). In addition to these national initiatives, however, Australian researchers have been involved in developing and testing SEL approaches at a programme level (see for example in this volume, Carroll et al. 2017; Cornell et al. 2017; Frydenberg et al. 2017; Frydenberg and Muller 2017; Slemp et al. 2017).

Given the nationwide KidsMatter and MindMatters programmes, Humphrey (2013) contends that the approach towards SEL in Australia is quite centralised. This differs from the approach in the USA, which involves much greater decentralisation due to different state and district policies on education and SEL. The extent to which a country is centralised or decentralised in its SEL approaches has a significant impact on research and implementation. Whereas evaluation of SEL programmes has been a major focus in the USA (because, as Humphrey argues, there is a need for SEL programme creators to justify why their programme is superior to others), there has been less evaluation occurring in countries like Australia (however, see Slee et al.'s 2009, 2012 evaluation of KidsMatter). This is an important contextual characteristic when considering the SEL research and practice in the Australian context, as well as directions for future research (discussed below).

Another point made by Humphrey (2013) is that in Australia there is quite a lot of flexibility in how SEL is implemented, which contrasts an often more rigid approach in the USA. Indeed, this is demonstrated via the KidsMatter and MindMatters initiatives and their provision of a list of resources from which schools can pick and choose to best suit their needs and circumstances. Together then, there are several important considerations when interpreting and examining how SEL is implemented in Australia and for understanding the approaches that have been taken and areas for future research. Despite this, it is clear that there is a growing interest in SEL and its importance for healthy development among Australian students.

3.2   SEL in the Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific region of the globe comprises a diverse array of countries and cultures. Although the Asia-Pacific region includes all countries that border the Pacific Ocean, in this volume the focus is on several countries: mainland China and Hong Kong, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and several Pacific Islands.

One broad way in which to differentiate different cultures in this region is via their individualistic or collectivist focus. Individualistic societies tend to emphasise the individual, whereas collectivist societies emphasise the group (Hofstede 1983). Hecht and Shin (2015) suggest this cultural difference may impact the relevance or relative promotion of the five different SECs. For example, self-awareness and self-management may be more salient in individualistic cultures (e.g. regulating

one's own emotions), whereas social awareness and relationships skills are more salient in collectivist cultures (e.g. getting along well with others). This difference likely impacts the SECs that are addressed and focused on in different countries and contexts in the Asia-Pacific, as well as how they are taught (in groups versus individual activities; Hecht and Shin 2015). The chapters in this volume provide context-specific examples that speak to this (e.g. see Macfarlane et al. 2017 for Indigenous perspectives from New Zealand).

In a review of SEL across multiple countries, Torrente et al. (2015) highlight some further considerations when examining cross-cultural differences. First, they suggest that several Asian countries recognise the need to transform traditional academic-focused education systems to better meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (see also Liem et al. 2017, Wu et al. 2017, both this volume). SEL is seen as one avenue for helping to make this transformation (Torrente et al. 2015) and for supporting students to become resilient citizens (Humphrey 2013). Thus, there is increasing interest in SEL in Asian countries to match the interest growing in the rest of the world.

Second, SEL has been approached in various ways. Whereas Australia (see Littlefield et al. 2017) and Singapore (see Liem et al. 2017) harness the CASEL (2013) framework in their educational policies towards SEL, different approaches are evident in other countries (see for example Lagi and Armstrong 2017 this volume regarding Pacific Island Nations, and Macfarlane et al. 2017 regarding Indigenous ideologies in New Zealand). Indeed, Torrente et al. (2015) examined SEL-related policies and found that SEL tended to be addressed via citizenship and values education in many Asian countries. For example, in China moral and character education has been integrated into national curricula to produce rounded, ethical, and patriotic citizens (Dello-Iacovo 2009). Yu and Jiang (2017) provide further details of this in mainland China. In addition, Lee and Bong (2017 this volume) describe recently introduced national policy on character education in Korea that has relevance to SEL.

Third, although countries in the region have educational policies that appear to promote skills and competencies relevant to SEL, the extent to which this is backed up with practical recommendations and procedures remains somewhat unclear (Torrente et al. 2015). Thus, there is a need to delve more specifically into SEL practices that are occurring in the region—and this volume provides an opportunity to do this (see for example, Wu and Mok 2017 for how SEL is being implemented in the Hong Kong Catholic education system and Liem et al. 2017 regarding Singapore's efforts).

Finally, Torrente et al. (2015) and Humphrey (2013) argue that not enough evidence-based practice or evaluations of SEL approaches are conducted in the region. As noted above, it is possible that this is due to the centralisation of national policies (Humphrey 2013), but may also be due to a more nascent interest in SEL in this region. In terms of evaluation work being carried out, details of recent approaches are evident in Hong Kong (Wu and Mok 2017), Korea (Lee and Bong 2017), and Singapore (Liem et al. 2017).

3.3 Summary

In sum, there are regional and contextual characteristics and differences that are important to consider when investigating the state of SEL in Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Nonetheless, there appears to be broad interest in promoting the social and emotional development of students alongside more traditional academic foci (Humphrey 2013; Torrente et al. 2015). Torrente et al. (2015) call for greater cross-country collaboration within (and beyond) the region to promote SEL: "Whereas the diversity in approaches can be enriching, that potential can only be realized if lessons are shared in a systematic way" (p. 581). The current volume provides an important step in this process by considering perspectives and programmes across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

4 Gaps and Future Directions

When looking at the contextual characteristics relevant to SEL implementation and research in Australia and the Asia-Pacific, two key gaps that provide a guide for future directions are evident. First, there is a need for more work on the impact of individual programmes specific to the region (see for example O'Connor and Cameron 2017 this volume for the implementation of one programme in an Australian school). As noted above with respect to both Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, more evaluation work is another central issue for the region in order to ensure that programmes are delivering positive outcomes to students, teachers, and schools (see Frydenberg and Muller 2017 for one example of challenges regarding evaluation of SEL).

In addition to these issues specific to Australia and the Asia-Pacific, there are also gaps in knowledge surrounding SEL that are relevant to countries worldwide. There is a need for more research examining the relevance and influence of SEL among unique populations to understand the extent to which mainstream and/or targeted efforts are the most effective approaches for promoting SEC among different subgroups of students (e.g. Indigenous students, at-risk students, gifted students; see Dobia and Roffey 2017; Martin et al. 2017; Smith 2017 all this volume). Only briefly touched upon in this chapter is the work examining SEL and SEC with respect to teachers. This includes teachers' skills in implementing SEL effectively, their ability to create a positive and supportive classroom (and school) climate, and their own SEC and well-being. Several chapters in this volume consider this important issue (see Collie 2017; Hazel 2017; Freeman and Strong 2017) and more work in this area is essential for ensuring that SEL is most effectively promoted. Finally, conceptual grounding for the area of SEL is growing as evidenced by emerging frameworks and models (e.g. Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Weissberg et al. 2015). The area of SEL may also benefit from harnessing long-standing theoretical and empirical work from education and educational

psychology more broadly to bolster understanding of the foundations of SEL and SEC and how they are associated with important student and teacher outcomes (see Martin et al. 2017 this volume for more on this issue; see also Tarbetsky et al. 2017 this volume). In sum, addressing these gaps is essential for the continuing growth of SEL and to ensure the aims of fostering SEC and healthy school and community climates, and creating healthy and productive citizens are achieved.

5   Conclusion

The current chapter has provided an overview of SEL including important conceptual underpinnings for the area, key definitions of the five well-accepted SECs that are promoted in SEL, and positive student and teacher outcomes associated with effective SEL implementation. From prior research, it is clear that SEL is relevant to developing healthy and constructive members of society. While the majority of research has been conducted in the USA, Europe and UK, there is growing recognition for the importance of SEL in other areas of the world. The current chapter has provided some important contextual characteristics relevant to SEL implementation and research in Australia and the Asia-Pacific. In sum, it is hoped that this chapter (and the volume) will help to extend awareness of and effective practice in SEL in the region and beyond.

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