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Towards Change: Making Social Emotional Learning a Global Standard

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Introduction

For far too long, the measure of educational achievement has been rooted in academic success with a focus on human capital. While this may have served generations in past eras, such as during the Industrial Revolution, a focus on human capital alone serves only to widen the existing societal inequalities even further. UNESCO's *Learning to Become* initiative acknowledges that there is "a rich diversity of ways of knowing" (UNESCO, 2019). Furthermore, it is important to recognize how other forms of capital, such as social capital can bolster individual capital (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). Theorists and educational scholars have been favouring the principles associated with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) over IQ for quite some time (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Denham, Wyatt, Bassett, Echeverria, & Know, 2009). It is only somewhat recently that SEL frameworks, such as the one provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), are starting to find their way into curriculum design.

The focus for this paper is to provide a possible futures scenario plan which examines the ways in which SEL could be embedded into education systems on a global scale. The foresight tool of scenario planning will be used with specific reference to the revised Ontario Mathematics Curriculum for 2020 which has included SEL as one of its strands for the first time. It is not the aim of this paper to argue the correlation between SEL and improved student academic achievement, as there is already much evidence-based scholarship work in this field. Rather, the challenges to the measurement of such a constructs-based framework will be evaluated with a comparison to the concerns around the recent inclusion of global competencies on large scale assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered in 2018.

The BIG Idea

The big idea is simply this: we need to shift the emphasis from a system that privileges cognitive knowledge and human capital to one that *also* values the development of the individual's social and emotional intelligence. The UNESCO *Learning to Become* initiative acknowledges that it is time to address the question: "What do we want to become?" (UNESCO, 2020). Social and Emotional Learning offers a way for individuals to answer this question for themselves in a way that cognitive knowledge cannot. The skills offered through an SEL framework "help students [to] develop confidence, cope with challenges and think critically" (Ontario Government, 2020). These are the skills that enable future generations to achieve success and to derive satisfaction from their lives.

Historically, educational reforms have been centered around neo-liberal ideologies and while attempts have been made in earnest to reduce the 'achievement gap' and provide upward mobility for all classes in society, it is just not possible to see these changes when academic achievement remains at the core of what is being assessed and measured. Amongst the results from his meta-analysis, John Hattie (2009) identified "helping students to develop a sense of independence and self-efficacy [and] students see[ing] themselves as part of a cohesive and supportive group of peers" (Hattie, 2009, as cited in Shanker, 2019, p. 11) as the most important factors for effective learning. The OECD, which views the field of education through a human capital lens, has sought to include a measure of global competence in its large-scale assessment tool, the PISA test. However different from SEL, global competence does share many of the same constructs as SEL (such as self-awareness, curiosity and open-mindedness), as well as similar goals including the development of attitudes of empathy and respect for difference and

diversity (Engles, 2019). It also presents similar challenges regarding measurement and data analysis.

The Ministry of Education in Ontario has recognized the importance of Social Emotional Learning and has included it as strand in the most recent version of the Mathematics Curriculum (grades 1-8). This paper will examine how the shift from exclusive focus on cognitive knowledge in previous Ontario mathematics programs to now include Social Emotional Learning can contribute to the aspirations of UNESCO's 2050 Learning to Become initiative. But first, it is worth examining the rationale for orienting the focus of education towards SEL.

Why should SEL be adopted into curriculum?

According to CASEL, "SEL is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020). There are many reasons for including an SEL framework into national (or provincial in the case of Ontario) curriculums. Using a four-dimension rational framework (Addey & Sellar, 2019, p.8) group the reasons for implementation into political, economic, technical, and socio-cultural rationales, thus addressing the concerns of the many stakeholders involved in educational reform. Addey and Sellar (2019) applied this framework to their justification for participation and (non)participation in ILSAs and it aligns nicely to the rationale for implementing an SEL framework.

Political Rationale

Many countries are beginning to move away from looking solely at GDP as a measurement of a country's success and preferring instead to use other forms of measurement such as the global happiness index. SEL is one of the key elements that make up a person's total

wellbeing. Richard Layard is credited with having written the first paper to explicitly connect empirical research and happiness. Layard also chaired the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Health and Wellbeing in 2011, where he proposed, in response to the OECD's attempts to redefine progress, a Gross Happiness Index to supplement the traditional measure of Gross Domestic Product ("Richard Layard" n. d.; Binkley, 2011). The implementation of an SEL framework at the primary and secondary school levels would prove valuable in raising the happiness index of its nation.

Assuming international benchmarking using PISA testing in the OECD continues, there is a dearth of literature and scholarly research to indicate the improvement to student achievement in academics when attention to social emotional wellbeing is adhered to (even if SEL itself is not being measured by large-scale assessment). The implementation of an SEL framework can help to enhance a country's standings in the global education league tables. This in turn leads to the sharing of resources and policy reforms.

Economic Rationale

Suicide rates and mental health diagnosis such as depression and anxiety are at an all-time high worldwide. The costs associated with treating mental health concerns are high and, in some places, non-existent due to stigma, poorly designed medical systems, or lack of practitioners (Case, 2020). From a macro perspective, it is more cost effective to treat the source of the problem rather than to simply treat the problem. By addressing social and emotional welfare with our students throughout their formative schooling years, the conditions that can lead to mental health disorders can be mitigated.

On a micro level, the rationale for incorporating SEL into the curriculum is necessary to reflect the skills required by today's workforce. The skill sets that are required for students

entering the workforce today are collaboration, critical thinking, and communication (Blake, 2020, interview), all of which are enhanced by the inclusion of SEL alongside the standard academic instruction.

Technical Rationale

From a technical standpoint, if SEL is recognized globally as an important component of achievement, then it becomes easier for global jurisdictions to share best practices and methodology regarding SEL implementation and measurement. There is already a rising network of schools and districts, both at local levels and globally, who are invested in fostering an SEL community.
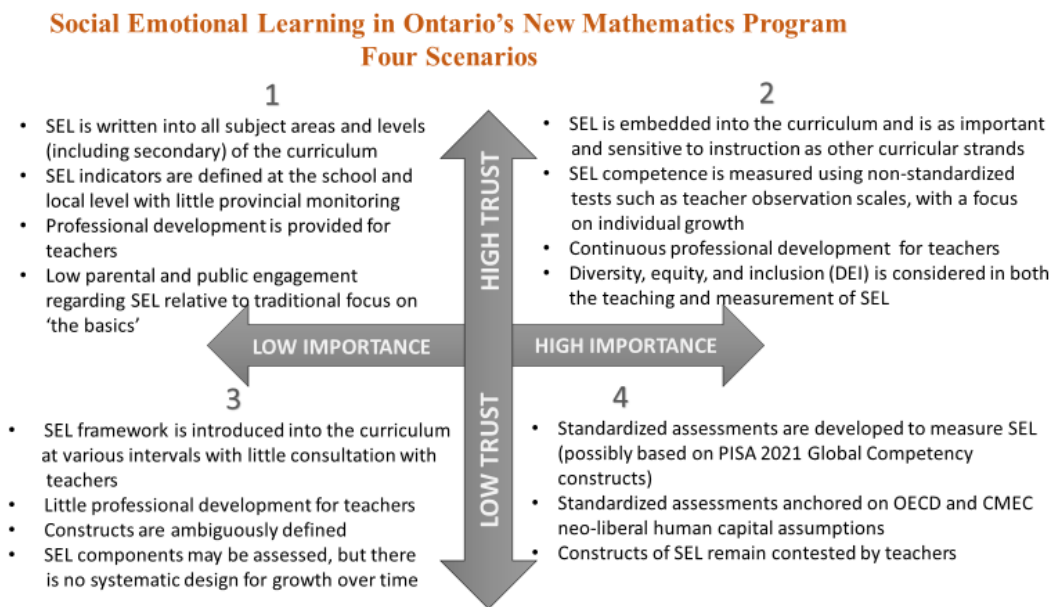
Social-Cultural Rationale

Embedding an SEL framework at the primary and secondary schooling level can help to foster a positive change in society and potentially instigate a shift away from the 5-day, 40-hour work week paradigm. In the post-COVID era it is increasingly important to look at personal wellbeing as more and more people are out of work, industries are changing, and people are working remotely from their home in isolation. A focus on Social Emotional Learning extends to the natural environment and instills feelings of empowerment regarding one's self-worth and ability to make change. In addition to improving one's ability to establish positive relationships, SEL has been proven to contribute to an improved self-awareness which in turn can result in "positive social adjustment, reduced bullying, better prosocial tendencies, and enhanced emotion regulation" (Eisenbert, Spinrad, & Morris, 2014, as cited in Shanker, 2014, p. 3).

Foresight Tool: Scenario Planning

The construction of scenarios offers a useful entry point for considering the impacts of SEL in Ontario's new mathematics program. The tool of scenario planning has been chosen as "a mechanism for imagining new possible futures for education" (UNESCO, 2019). This method allows for multiple scenarios to be reviewed while providing attention to the roles of stakeholders surrounding the issue of global educational reform. In Figure 1, four possible future scenarios are divided into quadrants using the vectors: low to high trust, and low to high importance.

Figure 1:

Social Emotional Learning in Ontario's New Mathematics Program
Four Scenarios

1
- SEL is written into all subject areas and levels (including secondary) of the curriculum
- SEL indicators are defined at the school and local level with little provincial monitoring
- Professional development is provided for teachers
- Low parental and public engagement regarding SEL relative to traditional focus on 'the basics'

2
- SEL is embedded into the curriculum and is as important and sensitive to instruction as other curricular strands
- SEL competence is measured using non-standardized tests such as teacher observation scales, with a focus on individual growth
- Continuous professional development for teachers
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is considered in both the teaching and measurement of SEL

HIGH TRUST
LOW IMPORTANCE — HIGH IMPORTANCE
LOW TRUST

3
- SEL framework is introduced into the curriculum at various intervals with little consultation with teachers
- Little professional development for teachers
- Constructs are ambiguously defined
- SEL components may be assessed, but there is no systematic design for growth over time

4
- Standardized assessments are developed to measure SEL (possibly based on PISA 2021 Global Competency constructs)
- Standardized assessments anchored on OECD and CMEC neo-liberal human capital assumptions
- Constructs of SEL remain contested by teachers

Low Importance/Low Trust

In this scenario, there has been a positive move in the direction of including SEL into the curriculum; students in grade 8 are taught to "express and manage their feelings, and show understanding of the feelings of others, as they engage positively in mathematics activities"

(Ontario Curriculum, 2020). However, SEL is only addressed in one subject area, in this case mathematics, and only in grades 1-8. It is not clear how teachers should assess these skills using formative or summative assessments. As a result, it is likely that many teachers will gloss over this new component of the curriculum without adequate professional development. This scenario most accurately represents the current state of the Ontario curriculum.

High Importance/Low Trust

In quadrant 4, the situation for teachers and students remains relatively the same as in the low trust, low importance scenario. The difference is that much more importance is given to the SEL framework as its skill components are being assessed using standardized assessment (either at the international, or national level). This is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it is important that a clear definition and language be allocated to the skills and competencies that are being taught and measured through SEL (Blake, 2020; Engle et al., 2019). In their paper, *Toward an international measure of global competence? A critical look at the PISA 2018 framework*, Engles, Rutkowski and Thompson (2019) found that the term 'global competence,' as with any construct, "requires a well-reasoned and exacting definition before it can be accurately measured" (Engle et al., 2019, p.127). Furthermore, they reason that "allowing an international organisation to selectively choose and misinterpret academic literature in order to develop its own definition is clearly problematic [and] it is even more problematic when we consider the potential of global competence rankings to influence political decisions" (Engle et al., 2019, p.127).

A second concern is the with the act of measurement itself and the use of this type of data. As with the any construct, measurement is usually supported using indicators for each of the skills. According to Addey & Sellar (2019), "ILSAs do not provide information on individual

students and are designed to provide periodic benchmarking of systemic performance" (Addey &

Sellar, 2019, p. 3). When examining an individual's social and emotional development, multiple

choice questions, such as the ones offered by the PISA test in 2018 to assess global competence,

are not adequate in measuring SEL skills because they do not consider context or a student's

baseline in that competency. The construct of SEL is fraught with conceptual and psychometric

measurement challenges (Engle et al., 2019). For example, the degree to which a student feels

confident facing a mathematical problem could vary based on several factors. For an accurate

measure of one's social and emotional intelligence, assessments such as self-reflections,

controlled observational conditions, and surveys which measure a person's growth are optimal.

These types of assessment tools are generally not used in ILSAs such as the PISA test because

they require skilled assessors, rather than machines that scan multiple choice answer sheets.

Low Importance/High Trust

According to Theresa Blake, former Director of Social and Emotional Learning at

Appleby College, two things are needed to successfully embed an SEL framework into the

curriculum: common language and common practices (Blake, 2020, interview). Blake worked

with a team of educators at Appleby College to design a common language (based on the

CASEL language and framework) which was responsive to the needs of students attending

Appleby. Continuous professional development was then offered to the full faculty in the form of

sessions delivered at the start of the school year, and throughout the year in a series of 'lunch and

learn' sessions. Messaging around SEL was also delivered to the parents and the rest of the

school community through newsletters and the offer to participate in workshops based on the

faculty summer read, "The Happiness Advantage" by Shawn Achor. Some measurement took

shape in the form of surveys. There was a focus on the social and emotional development of

teachers, as well as students with the expectation that this would trickle down to the students. This level of implementation is rewarding but challenging to measure through data. It also requires a significant investment of time and funding. Although this example, describes a high trust scenario, it is still considered low importance because while the implementation of SEL has a significant impact for the student population at Appleby College, SEL is not recognized by the Ontario curriculum and without wide-scale adoption, SEL remains an intrinsic benefit after academic success has been achieved.

High Importance/High Trust

In this final scenario (quadrant 2), the principles of SEL are thoroughly embedded into the curriculum at all levels and in all subject areas thus, ensuring its significance compared with cognitive knowledge. Shanker (2014) identifies two fundamental principles necessary for successful adoption of SEL:

> "1. Social and emotional competencies are as important as more formal academic skills. 2. Students can learn social and emotional competencies in the same ways that they learn formal academic skills. (Shanker, 2014, p.5)

Furthermore, in this scenario, SEL is being measured at the school level to support students' growth and development in these competencies. The style of measurement has been carefully considered, considering diversity, equity and inclusion and the data gathered is being used to further enhance delivery of SEL based on student needs. The data needs to be shared with the students themselves and next steps developed by the key stakeholders (Blake, 2020, interview).

Facing Challenges

Within the possible futures explored in the previous section, several overlapping tensions exist which can be categorized into two main themes: the customization of SEL frameworks, and what to do about large-scale assessment. These themes will be discussed with the use of vignettes to explore possible solutions.

Vignette #1

A leadership team has been given the green light to embed an SEL framework into their school's curriculum and pedagogy. A teacher leader is put in charge of looking for a framework that will suit the needs of the students. In their search, they become bogged down with the language of SEL. Constructs like creativity, curiosity, confidence, growth mindset, flourishing, and resilience, appear over and over in the material. How does a school design a framework, and develop measuring tools?

The design of an SEL framework must be approached with care: "SEL cannot be cookie cutter" (Blake, 2020, interview). Attempting to streamline the process, Harvard University has developed a tool which enables the user to compare over 40 different SEL frameworks. To overcome this challenge, there must be sufficient time allocated to framework design. There is no standardized assessment tool for measuring growth in SEL and the onus for accountability is placed on teachers' professional judgement. For this reason, teachers need continuous professional development to be able to deliver and measure an SEL framework well.

Vignette #2

Educational leaders and assessment specialists are working on devising a PISA test which will measure the social and emotional competency of 'self-awareness.' They must adhere to the following parameters when creating the test: the questions must be multiple choice, the questions must be relatable to all students from all 37

member countries of the OECD, the questions must be free from bias and be equitable taking into account cultural differences for all participating students, the questions must assess the growth of individuals in the area of self-awareness, and the results from the test should evaluate the effectiveness of each participating country's SEL framework. How do they go about devising this test?

The challenges presented in this vignette illustrate the concerns around assessing SEL using ILSAs. In considering cultural differences alone, it is unfair for a country's educational merit to hinge on constructs which present themselves differently with separate values attached depending on the jurisdiction. It is also (much like global competency) impossible to empirically validate the skills associated with SEL. This in turn can lead to the problem of 'dynamic nominalism' where the test invents Social and Emotional Learning as a physical object that will then influence education systems across the globe (Engle et al., 2019). According Addey and Sellar (2019), the stakes around ILSAs are high as "international assessments and data that [has] previously been questioned [is] accepted as valid and even understood as essential for policy making, benchmarking progress, setting standards, and identifying 'what works.'" In short, there is no obvious solution to this challenge.

Conclusion

When it comes to educational reform, careful consideration must be given in the introduction of new learning outcomes such as SEL. Under the current education model, in the view of many, we are churning out students who are great at taking tests, but who lack the capacity to function in the workplace. The futures imagined in this paper point to the difficulty in measuring Social Emotional Learning on a large scale, which in turn present the challenge of making a global, educational reform without the ability to benchmark or assess its success.

There are many arguments which could be offered in support of and against the measurement of SEL using international large-scale assessment. On the one hand, assessment of constructs using indicators is problematic for several reasons. It is important that SEL be assessed for individual growth and development; however, assessment tools such as scales and self-reflections are preferable to the type of multiple-choice questions that lend themselves better for ILSA (Blake, 2020, interview). On the other hand, ILSAs such as PISA are not going anywhere and indeed serve an important function in educational systems around the world (Addey & Sellar, 2019) as they provide tools for benchmarking and forums for sharing best practices. By seeking methods to successfully measure SEL on an ILSAs, it can help to legitimize the importance of SEL and signify to global communities that these are skills worth teaching at all levels of schooling.

The inclusion SEL frameworks can be further incentivized by the global shift toward valuing happiness and wellbeing. In Addey and Sellar's (2019) paper *Is it worth it? Rationales for (non)participation in international large-scale learning assessments*, they list several factors including: global education agendas, global assessment cultures, expansion of ILSA scope and coverage, as well as technological changes, which suggest that it will be possible to receive international buy-in, and that the capability to measure and amass data on components of SEL will be possible in the future. In sum, there are many possible futures for SEL each with its own set of risks and benefits.

As educational leaders move from scenario to strategy, there are many factors to consider such as providing a consistent and well-recognized language and framework for SEL. Over time, the results of these efforts will be reflected in the academic standings, but this will require a leap of faith to get started and meaningful public dialogue. Presently, there are a plethora of scales

and frameworks available with new measurement instruments on the horizon. Many jurisdictions, including Ontario are making the first implementations of SEL in primary schooling yet side-stepping the importance of SEL at the secondary high school when the stakes are much higher. The challenges of implementing and assessing SEL might well be overcome with better instruments, increased resources, research, and support – but above all will require the engagement and leadership of the profession. The rewards could yield a generation of young people entering the work force who are better equipped to tackle the problems of climate change, poverty and social unrest that persist today.

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