

Editorial

Special issue: SEL Training, Intervention and Research Worldwide

Guest Editors: Maurice J. Elias^a and Chryse Hatzichristou^b

^a *Rutgers University, USA*

^b *National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece*

There is no doubt, at the time of this writing, that social-emotional learning (SEL) is becoming a world-wide phenomenon (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Many readers may be more familiar with SEL by another name: Character Education, Prosocial Education, Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning, Social-Emotional Competence, Moral Education, Positive Youth Development, ‘Non-Cognitive’ Skills, ‘Soft’ Skills, and many more (Elias, Leverett, Duffell, Humphrey, Stepney, & Ferrito, 2015). What seems to be a matter of converging agreement is well expressed by the World Economic Forum (2016):

A recent longitudinal analysis by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) across nine countries showed that having a balanced set of cognitive and social and emotional skills is crucial for children to better face the challenges of the 21st century; social and emotional skills in particular play an important role in improving children’s chances of lifetime success [...] Some employers already recognize the benefits of social and emotional skills in the 21st-century workplace – including global internet giant Google. After examining employee surveys and performance reviews, Google found that its most effective managers were good coaches, took an active interest in their employees’ lives and were skilled at listening to and sharing information [...] The résumés of successful candidates will need to include social and emotional proficiency. (p. 6)

As we look ahead toward preparing students for adulthood and citizenship in a world beset by accelerating technological, vocational, educational and other changes, the attendant disruptions in current ways of working and being, and the pressures of persistent and growing inequities, one thing is clear: social-emotional competencies and character will become more and more important. These will never go out of style, and in fact will determine both the vector and effectiveness of how societal challenges are addressed and overcome. The words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. express the situation we are facing and why

social-emotional and character development must be an integral part of world-wide education for all children (King, 1987):

As long as there is poverty I will never be rich [...] as long as diseases are rampant I can never be health [...] I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. We are interdependent. (p. 21)

The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason but with no morals. (p. 41)

The ultimate measure of people is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy. (p. 24)

We were therefore excited to create a special issue of the *IJEE* on ‘SEL Training, Intervention and Research Worldwide.’ In the process of creating this special issue, we have noticed the following:

1) There was a relatively low response to our call, suggesting that much of what is happening now in the SEL field is more focused on practice than on research and, as implied earlier, within networks that are not tapped by the traditional SEL community.

2) The contextual factors influencing SEL implementation are so powerful that large-scale research projects are challenging. Hence, most of the studies we found, and included, are mixed-method or qualitative studies.

3) It would appear that SEL competencies are valued across countries and cultures and the implementation challenges are more similar than different across diverse settings. Perhaps this has something to do with the fundamental nature of schooling as a social activity based in caring relationships that attempts to accomplish increasingly complex and nuanced tasks of socialization without substantially increased resource, time, preparation, or support.

The papers we have included reflect work in six different countries and focus on issues of implementation, assessment, and application and adaptation of different existing SEL-related programs and approaches to international contexts in which their application is relatively new. One caveat that this creates for the field is that the application of training and intervention approaches to places where they have not been validated must be done with action-research methodology. That is, we recommend that the orientation should be ‘best-available evidence’ as the guiding principle for beginning the work, with a commitment to ongoing monitoring of the work to guide its adaptation to specific contexts. Chronicling one’s work using mixed method approaches- providing qualitative nuance to accompany quantitative findings- seems to be an indispensable way that the field will advance and SEL will transfer effectively to international contexts. This raises questions about how strongly research findings in one context generalize to others (both within and across nations). From our perspective, in reviewing for this special issue as well as our collective work in the field, suggests a stance of caution. We agree with the sentiment expressed by Emory Cowen (1971), the

founder of the Primary Mental Health Project and a prolific action-researcher in the community psychology tradition. When asked, on the occasion of the successful adoption of PMHP in its 1,000th school in Guam, whether he had found a generalizable program, Emory responded that he would have to wait until its successful adoption in the 1,001st school, and so on. That is, he believed that the only proof of generalization was effective adoption, and that adoption did not mean doing so with no changes. Adaptation was necessary for successful adoption. What made the difference for PMHP—and equivalently for all contemporary SEL-related programs-- was the extent to which essential program principles were embedded into the adapted version, enabling it to be effective while also contextually and culturally congruent. These claims could not be subjected to experimental empirical verification as a matter of practical and technical feasibility.

Local approaches to ongoing action-research in a spirit of continuous improvement are the guiding methodology for ongoing monitoring and adaptation. This may strike many empiricists as unsatisfying. And well it may be. However, there are no purveyors of evidence-based programs that, to our knowledge, forbid application to new context until they have passed the ‘gold standard’ of randomized controlled trials, or some close equivalent. Hence, we believe greater efforts in the field must be devoted to what Anthony Bryk and colleagues (2010) call ‘assessment for improvement,’ i.e., locally-tailored assessment systems designed to provide essential feedback to guide implementation-related changes (Elias, Ferrito, & Mocerri, 2016).

There is one additional observation from these papers (Note: This section is being written at the insistence of Maurice Elias, overriding the modesty of co-editor of this Special Issue, Chryse Hatzichristou). The work of the Center for Research and Practice of School Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Hatzichristou and Lianos, this issue) shows the creative breadth, depth, and culturally congruent adaptation that comes from an intense focus on SEL by a set of colleagues over a long period of time, within a dedicated ‘Lab’ structure. The breadth of creative applications of SEL over time, by a team with steadily-building expertise, has included programs that have become important to graduate training in education and school psychology in Greece, programs reaching outside of Greece (including one based on the mythic journey of Odysseus), and, most saliently, programs that have been called upon by the nation in response to crisis. Only when a team has a deep understanding of SEL principles (not to imply that there is a unique set, but, rather, that a coherent set that has guided a team’s numerous SEL training, intervention, and research enterprises over time), can it make adaptations to a variety of contexts and needs with integrity and effectiveness.

Indeed, the field seems to advance most from integration of SEL-related research and practice by teams that work over long periods of time in multiple settings. Those new to SEL research often rediscover what is established in the literature, albeit at times in new contexts in which prior findings have not been previously documented. However, creative, innovative, deeply rooted SEL is most often found when promoted by enduring entities. Thus, we advocate for fewer isolated SEL projects and more collaborative projects, particularly those linked to established Labs, Centers, or research teams. At the risk of offending those we might omit, examples of the kinds of organizations we are referring to include:

- Center for Research and Practice of School Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece;
- Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab of Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA;
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning in Chicago, Illinois, USA
- Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, USA
- Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta,
- Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, Birmingham, U.K.;
- Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, Connecticut, USA;
- Comer School Development Program at the Yale Child Study Center, Connecticut, USA;
- and
- Making Caring Common at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Massachusetts, USA

Certainly, as of this writing, other entities are emerging and others may exist internationally that the editors are not familiar with. We would urge the European Network for Social-Emotional Competence (ENSEC) and the Social and Emotional Interest Group of the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) to maintain an ongoing, international list of these SEL entities, and to foster communication and collaboration between these SEL groups and those embarking on a project of SEL training, implementation, or research. It is time take advantage of ease and advances in electronic communication to define a new era of collaborative research in SEL-related fields.

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