

Book Review
Social and Emotional Learning: A Critical Appraisal

Humphrey, N. (2013). *Social and emotional learning: A critical appraisal*. London, UK: Sage.

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“Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”
(www.casel.org)

Building on the important groundwork established by the emotional intelligence tradition advanced by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995), social and emotional learning has gained significant traction in educational systems across the globe. In *Social and emotional learning: A critical appraisal* (Sage, 2013), Neil Humphrey, an educational psychology professor at the University of Manchester, provides an incisive and penetrating analysis of the SEL approach.

While writing from within the SEL community, Humphrey’s critique is balanced, authentic, and important. He is not afraid to ask tough questions about the field’s research history, nor does he hesitate to advocate for SEL’s immense potential to influence student affective growth and learning. Humphrey challenges the SEL community to pursue excellence in the system’s foundations, development, and implementation, thus ensuring greater credibility, practice, and impact.

SEL has the potential to “promote students’ self-awareness, social awareness, relationship and responsible-decision-making skills; and...improve student attitudes and beliefs about self, others and school (www.casel.org). The approach has been remarkably popular. Humphrey notes that, in many respects, SEL’s development arc has much in common with many recent fads in Western education. However, he is very clear: SEL is not a fad. He believes that SEL is here to stay, and that it will continue to have an important impact on student growth.

However, Humphrey takes great pains to qualify his confidence in the SEL approach. While it is not a fad, neither is it a panacea, as some SEL proponents have suggested. Instead, SEL is an effectively developed way to address the affective dimension that has always been valued in education. Humphrey notes that SEL is unique from other approaches because it applies emotional intelligence theory and research to education (Hoffman, 2009), and it focuses on a developmental approach to social and emotional abilities (Denham and Brown, 2010).

Perhaps the most important contribution of Humphrey’s work is his identification of some key limitations of SEL-related research. These are limitations which he also believes must be addressed through better research and more realistically-aimed objectives. Humphrey notes that too many SEL-related studies have drawn on teacher or student self-reports or have been based on unpublished reports that have not

been sufficiently peer-reviewed, do not monitor implementation, and have poor or no reported reliability and validity considerations. These are significant challenges from an empirical perspective. However, Humphrey makes specific suggestions to address each of these concerns. He also provides evidence that some studies have overcome these deficiencies, thus advancing the SEL discourse.

One of the most significant challenges Humphrey identifies is the complexity of assessing implementation. Because SEL appears similar to many other attempts to address affective aspects of education (e.g., character education programs), practical steps taken to implement the approach can vary widely from school to school and from person to person. Without consistent strategies and a clear understanding of the model itself, assessing implementation has been very challenging. Humphrey is realistic about the authenticity of these challenges. Implementation depends heavily on the perceptions and attitudes of educational leaders and classroom teachers. And it demands that implementers pay attention and respond to the unique learners they are working with in classrooms. This will continue to be a significant challenge for SEL researchers, but Humphrey provides some important suggestions and questions to guide their work.

Humphrey challenges the panacea mindset that often characterizes SEL discourse. While the evidence suggests that well-structured, well-implemented SEL interventions can make a difference for students, caution, wisdom, and appropriate expectations are in order. Rather than claiming SEL is “good for everybody,” Humphrey writes:

We may consider for whom such approaches may be most needed and/or beneficial, why, and under what circumstances (Durlak et al., 2011; Weisz et al., 2005). Given this, SEL may be best viewed as a potentially very effective means through which to effect positive change for children and young people, but one that schools may need to consider in terms of their individual contexts (p. 138).

The evidence suggests that SEL has a marked impact on students who are typically deemed “at risk,” and will have small to moderate impacts (based on Durlak et al.’s (2011) effect size measures) for most students. SEL may not be a panacea, but it has the potential to be transformational for some students, and will, at the very least, positively influence the growth and development of all students. In this context it is important to note that the focus of SEL is not on academic impacts of the intervention, even though the research suggests that this will be a positive side-effect. The focus and benefit to students is the affective dimension. The approach can have a significant influence on social and emotional awareness and skills development. Despite the enthusiasm about academic impact, the true strength of the SEL approach is that it provides specific resources and tools for establishing a caring, relational educational context that develops self- and other- social and emotional awareness and skills.

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