Social and Emotional Learning

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Students and teacher smiling
in class, Mexico City, Mexico

TIRF Insights profiles recent research in the field of *English Language Teaching (ELT)* in a practical and accessible format. Our publication is written for parents, teachers, school leaders, and all student advocates who want to review recent educational trends in a non-academic way. Our 2022 paper profiles research on social and emotional learning (SEL) for 7–12-year-olds.

What are the key issues?

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to disrupted education, learning loss, and the wide-scale use of hybrid and online teaching and learning. The pandemic has also revealed and underscored a need to address not only students' academic skills—their ability to use language creatively and think critically—but also their social and emotional skills.

The importance of emotional intelligence and the need to support skills and learning beyond the purely academic has been acknowledged for many years. In his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, science journalist Daniel Goleman claimed that emotional intelligence is as important as IQ for social, professional, and academic success (Goleman, 1995). John D. Mayer, Peter Salovey, and David R. Caruso later developed a specific test to measure emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2003).

In recent years, schools and societies have focused increasing awareness on preparing our students to do the jobs that cannot be automated—jobs that require curiosity, independence, and creativity—by developing a set of competencies that are relevant to the modern world. In 2006, the Partnership for 21st-Century Skills published a framework to identify these competencies (P21, 2006). In 2013, Soland, Hamilton, and Stecher categorized the skills required for future or 21st-century success into three clear groups: 1) cognitive competencies, including core academic skills, creativity, and critical thinking, 2) interpersonal skills, or students' ability to relate to others, and 3) intrapersonal competencies, or students' attitudes and abilities to regulate their own behaviors, both inside and outside school.

In 2021, Paris-based OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) published its Survey on Social and Emotional Skills, identifying 15 core abilities and dividing them into five key areas: task performance, emotional regulation, collaboration, open-mindedness, and engaging with others. The report also includes two indices—a compound skill (self-efficacy) and achievement motivation—which we've represented as "Other Outcomes" in Figure 1. The OECD Survey provides a wealth of insights on promoting behavioral and mental well-being for policymakers and educators.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION
- Stress Resistance
- Optimism
- Emotional Control

TASK PERFORMANCE
- Responsibility
- Persistence
- Self-control

COLLABORATION
- Empathy
- Trust
- Cooperation

OTHER OUTCOMES
- Achievement Motivation
- Self-efficacy

OPEN-MINDEDNESS
- Tolerance
- Curiosity
- Creativity

ENGAGING WITH OTHERS
- Sociability
- Assertiveness
- Energy

Figure 1: Social and emotional skills profiled in the OECD Survey. Adapted from OECD (2021).

CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), based in the USA, uses a slightly different approach than OECD, dividing social and emotional learning into the following five categories: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2021b).

Researchers deploy a variety of terms when profiling social and emotional learning such as life skills, behavioral and mental well-being, character strengths, and personality traits. Essentially, all these descriptors identify the skills and behaviors that enable students to interact successfully as part of society. Social and emotional skills help us collaborate and cooperate effectively, face difficulties with resilience and optimism, analyze information critically, and approach learning with responsibility, curiosity, and tolerance.

In this paper, my goal is to demonstrate that the development of social and emotional skills is strongly linked with students' academic success and has a positive impact on their long-term well-being. I will also include suggestions for how, as teachers, educators, parents, and policymakers, we can support the development of students' social and emotional skills and encourage the recognition of their importance in students' education.

Students performing morning routine,
Shenzhen, China © John Stanmeyer

What do we know?

The 2021 OECD Social and Emotional Skills study was carried out with 3,000 students, their caregivers, teachers, and school principals from 10 different cities: Bogota, Colombia; Daegu, South Korea; Helsinki, Finland; Houston, USA; Istanbul, Turkey; Manizales, Colombia; Moscow, Russia; Ottawa, Canada; Sintra, Portugal; and Suzhou, China. In this study, 10- and 15-year-old students were asked a series of questions designed to evaluate their competency in the skills profiled in Figure 1. Their teachers and parents were then also asked for input, helping the researchers create a multi-dimensional picture of the students' social and emotional skills.

The OECD study found that, in general, 10-year-olds reported higher levels of social and emotional skills than 15-year-olds. Unlike academic learning, which follows a steady upward trend, the development of behavioral and mental well-being stalled and then dipped among the adolescents surveyed. This observation is consistent with longitudinal data showing that skills such as openness to experience and emotional stability decline from late childhood into early adolescence and then increase rapidly from late adolescence into early adulthood (Roberts et al., 2006). One possible explanation for this adolescent dip may be the delayed development of the frontal regions of the teenage brain compared with deeper brain structures, which can affect teenagers' ability to control their emotional actions (Tyborowska, 2016). Another key factor seems to be the *decreasing* value placed on students' acquisition of social and emotional skills after primary school, and the *increasing* focus on discipline, exam results, and academic achievement (Bailey et al., 2019). Particularly noteworthy, girls seem more likely to have lost confidence in their creative abilities by the time they turn 15 (OECD, 2021). Social and economic factors also play a part, with students from advantaged backgrounds reporting higher social and emotional skills than their disadvantaged peers in every skill measured (OECD, 2021).

Figure 2:
The Wellbeing and Academic Achievement Impact Study identifies key factors needed to promote student well-being and improved outcomes for students. Adapted from Lindorff (2020).
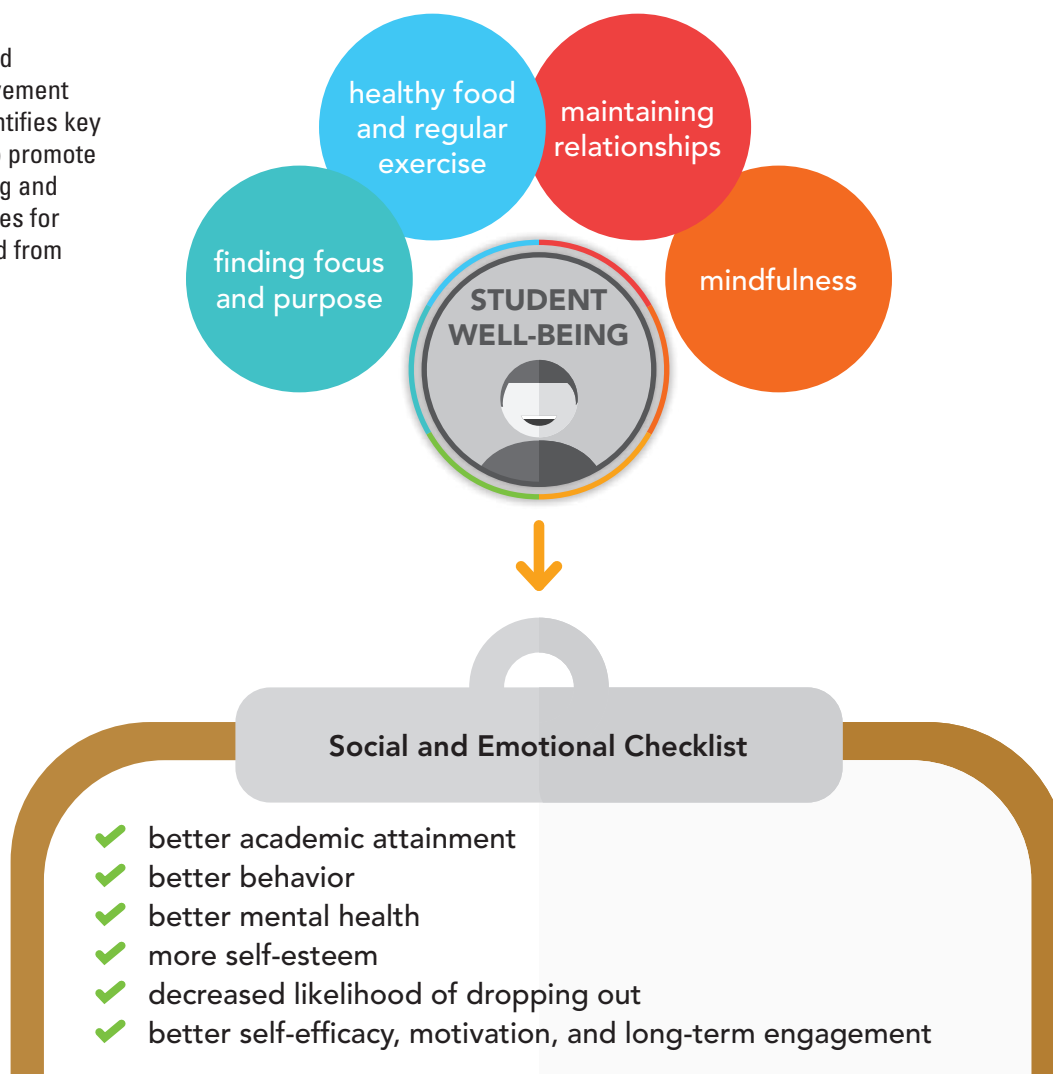
There is a clear link between some social and emotional skills—curiosity, trust, and persistence—and academic success (OECD, 2021). Similarly, the skills of optimism and stress resistance are strongly related to higher levels of psychological well-being (OECD, 2021).

The importance of support from both teachers and parents is stressed in the OECD study's conclusions. A sense of belonging, co-operative structure, fairness, and positive reinforcement—rather than punitive measures—all help create an environment where social and emotional learning can take place, benefitting students' overall sense of heathy identity along with their academic achievement.

The Wellbeing and Academic Achievement Impact Study undertaken by Dr. Ariel Lindorff for Oxford University Press similarly found a strong connection between students' healthy identity and academic success (Lindorff, 2020). Drawing on various international research reports, the study concluded that students' well-being was associated with long-term engagement, positive transition from primary to secondary school, educational success, and increased self-esteem and creativity. In this study, Dr. Lindorff stressed the importance of a whole-school approach to student development and the active engagement of the wider community in the promotion of students' emotional health.

What are the implications?

Many researchers agree that social and emotional skills are malleable (Feinstein, 2015; Heckman & Mosso, 2014). Children are not born with their personality traits set and defined. With support, encouragement, and early intervention, learners can develop skills such as persistence, resilience, tolerance, and curiosity, to their enormous benefit. The conclusion that social and emotional learning has very positive impacts on both academic achievement and long-term well-being represents an important policymaking opportunity for educators, school leaders, and government officials. Rather than viewing a focus on behavioral and mental well-being separately from—or a distraction to—academic study, these elements can be integrated into a balanced approach to promote overall student achievement.

Although there's a correlation between socioeconomic factors and the development of social and emotional skills, economically disadvantaged communities have run successful programs focused on developing behavioral and mental well-being. For example, the Escuela Nueva model, developed by Vicky Colbert in Colombia in the 1970s, favors teaching students in small groups where they work together to solve problems and apply their knowledge to real-life situations. The schools promote the principles of student democracy, civic participation, and tolerance, and they also focus strongly on teaching students how to learn, encouraging them to mentor and teach one another. The Escuela Nueva model has been applied in more than 16 countries around the world and has a proven record of success in poor regions (Drummond et al., 2016).

Figure 3: CASEL outlines a four-pronged approach to implementing SEL. Adapted from CASEL (2021b).
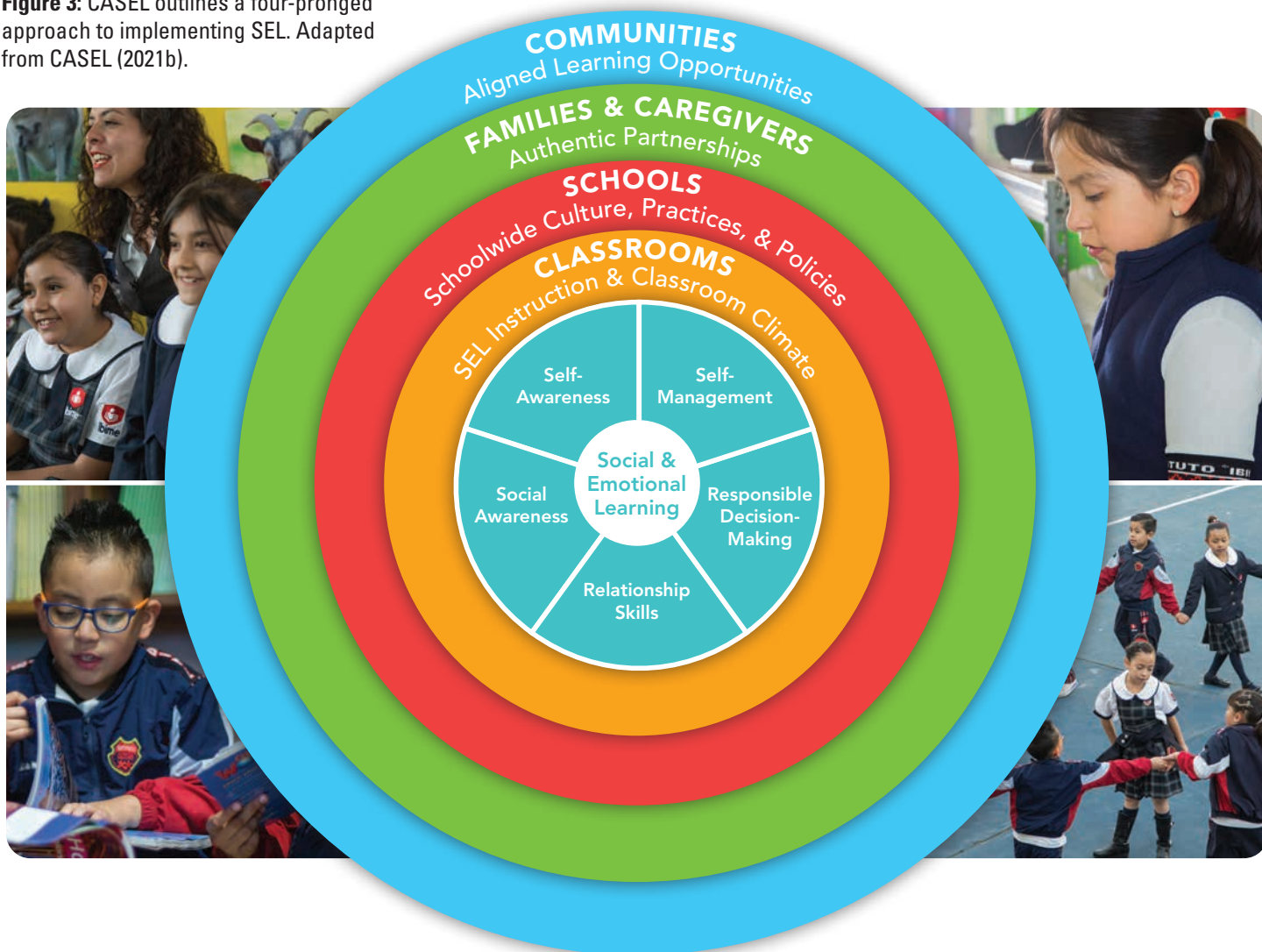
Government-led implementation of social and emotional educational policies has also proven effective. In South Korea, in the early 1990s, government surveys of students showed that the strong focus on exams led to low student engagement and many hours spent in exam preparation. The Presidential Commission on Education Reform introduced new policies which reduced the number of subjects that students had to take and included mandatory "creative experiential learning activities" (World Economic Forum, 2016). Embracing a stronger focus on social and emotional learning in South Korea has led to positive educational results. According to the 2015 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results, South Korean students rank among the top four countries in collaborative problem-solving (OECD, 2018).

Another country that tops the PISA rankings is Finland, which has adopted a student-centered, holistic approach to educational reform policies. Finland's Education Act defines education as a way to "support pupils' growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with knowledge and skills needed in life" (Basic Education Act, 1998, 2.1, Finland, p.1). The act's educational targets are the acquisition of transversal skills and knowledge areas rather than the demonstration of specific content-based outcomes. This Finnish law provides funding for rigorous teacher training and then gives teachers autonomy, encouraging them to focus on project-based learning. Students' rights are also recognized, and students are given a place in their school's decision-making framework regarding educational policies (Wilkins & Corrigan, 2019).

A clear research implication across the literature is that social and emotional skills should not be seen as an extra subject to be added to the curriculum, but as a core learning objective to be integrated throughout the student's life at school, at home, and in the community. CASEL suggests a four-pronged approach to implementing SEL into these three domains of the student educational experience (CASEL, 2021a).

Practical suggestions include:

In the classroom
- Fostering a sense of belonging and community
- Allowing students to take ownership and gain independence
- Incorporating pair-work, group-work, and teamwork into classroom practices
- Allowing time for students to reflect on the social emotional skills they are developing

In the school
- Providing opportunities for students to be heard and make decisions
- Adopting supportive and equity-focused forms of discipline
- Offering training to help teachers and other adults practice social and emotional skills
- Communicating the importance of social and emotional learning to staff and students

At home
- Providing support and advice to parents and caregivers
- Viewing the relationship between school and families as a two-way partnership with opportunities for both sides to learn
- Fostering a culturally responsive and welcoming school environment
- Involving families and community members in school governance

In the community
- Forming partnerships with community organizations, sharing resources and common goals
- Sharing social and emotional learning practices (e.g., time for self-reflection)
- Keeping lines of communication between school staff and community organizers open
- Agreeing on a common language when referring to social and emotional skills

Recommendations for a holistic SEL approach

Although there is plenty of research on the impact of learners' emotional well-being on academic achievement in general, there is little data on the specific link between social and emotional skills and language learning. However, for ELT practitioners, there is growing evidence that behavioral and mental well-being should be both "an approach and an outcome of education more broadly, and language learning specifically" (Mercer et al., 2018, p.13). Guidelines for the application of SEL approaches in the ELT classroom are outlined below.

Classroom Content
- Include real-world texts about different cultures, their values, and ethics. Use these texts as springboards for discussion for learners to consider the different elements that give them a sense of identity, including culture, family, beliefs, and principles. Challenge learners to compare information and discover shared values and beliefs.
- Include CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) texts on human biology and brain development to foster an understanding of the physiological causes for some of the behavioral and emotional changes that take place as learners move into adolescence.

Figure 4: Holistic approach to integrating SEL into language teaching and learning

CONTENT
- Include real-world & CLIL texts
- Use conflict resolution activities
- Teach social and emotional vocabulary

PRACTICE
- Involve students in decision-making
- Offer choice
- Incorporate project-based, flipped, and blended learning
- Use self-evaluation materials

SEL in the ELT Classroom

WHOLE SCHOOL
- Build an ELT curriculum that includes social and emotional skills and strategies
- Develop a feedback and marking system that rewards social and emotional learning
- Review and revise teacher training programs

COMMUNITY
- Use role models
- Inform and involve parents and caregivers

- Introduce conflict-resolution activities into the classroom. Strategies for doing so include games and tasks that focus on trust-building, finding common ground, understanding, and responding appropriately to different styles of conflict, identifying prejudice and assumptions, and using both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication.
- Teach social and emotional vocabulary (e.g., empathy, growth mindset, self-esteem) and use this language regularly in the classroom so that key words and terms become commonly understood and shared among all students.

Classroom Practice
- Involve students in some of the decision-making processes in the classroom to foster a sense of belonging and community. Even the youngest learners can work together to create a classroom contract, outlining expected behaviors and suggested disciplinary measures. Encourage students to make suggestions about how work can be displayed in the classroom and give them specific responsibilities, such as collecting homework or opening windows, so that they have a sense of classroom ownership.
- Offer choice where possible. For example, allow students to decide if they would prefer to work independently or in pairs or groups on a task; give students a choice of ways to present a piece of work—a poster, a blog, or a presentation; encourage students to choose and plan class events.
- Incorporate project-based learning into the curriculum. Set projects related to relevant and real-world topics and allow students to collaborate on them autonomously. Project-based learning can also be an effective way of involving the whole school, students' families, and the wider community in learning objectives. For example, if a classroom project is based on environmental issues, students can make posters about the environment and display them at school or ask their families to record how much they recycle at home.

- Use self-evaluation charts, "Can do" statements, or journals for students to assess their learning path and take responsibility for identifying the areas where they may need more support. Even the youngest learners can use smiley / sad face stickers to indicate which parts of a lesson they found easy or difficult.
- Introduce flipped and blended learning with digital content to foster independence, encouraging students to use online resources, videos, and slides to study and prepare new material at home, while focusing classroom time on communication, practice, experimentation, and extension.

Whole-School Recognition of SEL
- Incorporate specific activities that focus on the development of social and emotional skills into the school's ELT curriculum and explicitly teach strategies to promote well-being, compassion, and eco-literacy (Mercer, 2021). Involve school counselors in establishing a behavioral and mental well-being curriculum, ensuring that all school personnel—teaching and non-teaching—are committed to SEL objectives.
- Develop a feedback loop and marking system for the whole school that recognizes and rewards not only academic achievement but also gives credit for social and emotional skills such as determination, integrity, cooperation, and tolerance.
- Review teacher-training programs to ensure they recognize the significance of social and emotional skills. Include guidance on how to develop these in learners and incorporate well-being competencies not only for students but also for teachers.

A Community-based Approach
- Use role models from the local community to demonstrate how individuals can use social and emotional skills in a way that contributes to society and is also beneficial to their own well-being. Invite these role models to become involved in school life as regular visitors and mentors.
- Share social and emotional learning objectives as well as specific social and emotional vocabulary with parents and caregivers.

What's on the horizon?

The global pandemic has brought the issue of student well-being to the attention of educators, caregivers, and policymakers worldwide. There is little doubt that students who had previously developed skills of resilience, independence, and self-efficacy have adapted more easily to new contexts and unfamiliar ways of learning outside the traditional classroom. As schools assess the impact of COVID learning loss, inequities around behavioral and mental well-being will become increasingly apparent, and face-to-face learning will become an even more important tool for embedding social and emotional learning into our curricula, our schools, and the wider community.

In the future, I hope to see more engagement among schools, families, and communities. We need to foster an increased understanding of the importance of active student participation in decisions about their education. Schools could work more closely with the community, giving students the opportunity to see how social and emotional skills are applied in practical settings. Parents and caregivers could be encouraged to visit schools, participate in activities, and experience how schools promote the development of behavioral and mental well-being. Sharing information about the clear links among social and emotional learning, student engagement, and academic success will be key to involving the wider community and encouraging support from both within and without schools.

Educators and local decision-makers must now lead the change from a content-led and results-based focus in schools to a system that recognizes and rewards social, emotional, and behavioral skills. While in this paper I have focused on implementing SEL into the ELT classroom, we should also extend best practices from language learning classrooms into other areas of the curriculum. Language teaching, by its nature, focuses on effective communication rather than memorization of facts and dates. Many practices that are familiar to the language teaching classroom (e.g., encouraging pair-work, exploring cross-cultural topics) are powerful tools for the general development of social and emotional skills. I advise schools to set aside time for peer-training sessions as part of their Continuing Professional Development strategy.

In these sessions, teachers of all subjects can share their experiences and work together to apply their practice across the curriculum.

Today's students have shown tremendous agility, navigating their way in a world in which wearing masks, practicing social distancing, and learning online is the norm. Without consistent face-to-face classroom time, many students have suffered socially and academically. Finding new ways to support them is vital. As parents, teachers, and student advocates, we have all become more digitally proficient and we must continue to invest in teaching and communicating effectively online as well as in person. Support for student mental health should be part of every school's curriculum, with provision made for online teaching and counseling. Whether teaching online or in the classroom, educators should demonstrate and model empathy by setting aside time to check up on each student individually, even if only to ask, "How are you?" Education is no longer just about imparting knowledge; it is about guiding students to develop the social and emotional skills to help them apply their knowledge and support them in creating and managing their own learning environment.

Where can we find additional resources?

The Explore SEL project, at Harvard University, has created frameworks and systems to illustrate the skills, terms, and definitions used when describing social and emotional skills.

CASEL provides an overview of current research into social and emotional learning, with a focus on U.S. schools and educational policy.

The World Bank has developed the Step-by-Step toolkit, with resources to help teachers promote six core life skills.

The OECD has published the findings from the first cycle of its Survey on Social and Emotional Skills, with insights for policymakers and educators.

The United States Institute of Peace has published a Guide on Conflict Resolution in the EFL classroom, with a number of practical classroom activities and worksheets.

How can we take action?

You and your colleagues may want to explore further some of the themes in this paper. Here are some questions for guiding a discussion around your shared perspectives on social and emotional learning.

1. How do we currently recognize and reward the development of social and emotional skills in our school(s)? What more can we do? How can we demonstrate to our students that social and emotional skills are valued and important?

2. What is the vocabulary around social and emotional learning that we want to use in our school(s) and community? When we use terms like *grit*, *growth mindset*, and *resilience*, what exactly do we mean? Can we think of examples, anecdotes, and stories to illustrate their meaning for us and our students?

3. Who are the role models and leaders in our local community? You can think about people in the arts, sports, environmental advocacy, business, and technology. How can we encourage these role models and leaders to form connections with our school(s) and students?

4. How can we help our students feel like stakeholders in our school(s)? What responsibilities can we give them? How can we involve students in genuine decision-making processes?

About the author

Katherine (Kath) Stannett is a teacher trainer and materials writer based in England. She began her career as an English teacher in Japan. Kath writes for children and teenagers at all levels and has given plenaries and workshops in many countries including Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua, Poland, and Kazakhstan. Kath is interested in using real-world materials to help children develop 21st-century skills and global competence within a supportive and holistic framework.

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Girls learning to dance, Recife, Brazil © John Stanmeyer

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