

Social and Emotional Learning and Early Childhood Education: Redundant terms?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cie**Amanda J Moreno** 

Erikson Institute, USA

Mark K Nagasawa

Erikson Institute, USA

Toby Schwartz

Erikson Institute, USA

Abstract

Social and emotional learning is a young field, but a very old concept. The idea that children require explicit instruction in social-emotional capacities is present in the writings of philosophers as far back as Plato, and partly constitutes the roots of the “whole-child development” and “developmentally appropriate practice” frameworks in early childhood education today. Nevertheless, early childhood education has recently been embracing and embraced by the modern global social and emotional learning movement in compulsory school education. Why would early childhood education do this, given its long tradition of prioritizing social-emotional pursuits and, in fact, serving as a model for the rest of the education continuum? Using Minow’s “dilemma of difference” framework, this article critically examines the question of which set of consequences the early childhood education field should choose in the current era—those of potentially superficially modularizing social-emotional concerns and comingling them with undesirable compulsory school education accountability structures, or those of continuing an embedded approach within a potentially generic whole-child philosophy that is difficult to implement in the real world. After considering early childhood education’s challenges with living by its own philosophy, the authors recommend a cautious but proactive acceptance of new social and emotional learning models within early childhood education because this allows a public interrogation of whichever values and methods for imparting them are chosen. The authors argue that an active alignment around social and emotional learning may buffer the early childhood education principles of democracy and child agency against the marginalization from political cross-currents they have historically experienced.

Corresponding author:

Amanda J Moreno, Erikson Institute, 451 N Lasalle Drive, Chicago, IL 60654, USA.

Email: amoreno@erikson.edu

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It is the business of an intelligent theory of education to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties. (Dewey, 1997: 5)

In this piece, we explore a “Deweyan” middle way between early childhood education (ECE) and social and emotional learning (SEL), which are fields with overlapping as well as distinct histories and philosophical traditions. By some accounts, SEL—the explicit support of optimal social and emotional skills within educational settings—has existed as a field only since about 20 years ago (Durlak et al., 2015), when experts at the first conference of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) coined the term (Elias et al., 1997). The history of the field of ECE would indicate otherwise, however, given that some of the earliest philosophers as far back as the Enlightenment, who provided the basis for the prevailing modern ECE framework of “developmentally appropriate practice” (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009), emphasized the need for the explicit teaching of morality, character, and emotional resilience (e.g. Beatty, 1995; Elkind, 2015). The earliest history of child education philosophy occurred prior to the existence of the preschool or kindergarten, and was therefore focused on parents being the educators. Nevertheless, the idea that the social and emotional skills needed for a productive adulthood are not ideally achieved by default but require direct instruction—just like other skills—has existed for centuries, and is a pillar of the “whole-child” framework infused throughout the modern field of ECE.

Despite this strong tradition, pre-compulsory education in the USA and elsewhere has begun to embrace and be embraced by the modern SEL movement, as indicated in part by its inclusion in a preschool–high school SEL guide published as part of the field’s founding (Elias et al., 1997), as well as by recent initiatives to add SEL programs, modules, or supplements to ECE programs that were already purporting to employ “whole-child” curricula (e.g. Bierman et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2013). This raises questions for the ECE field, as ambivalence surrounds any effort to align it with compulsory school education (Halpern, 2013). We advance an argument that, rather than either/or debates, the possibility may exist for a deeper and unified ECE–SEL advocacy that embraces shared commitments to the progressive ideal of educating for democracy—a focus that is timely given the contemporary global political climate (Dewey, 1997, 2004).

The present article is addressed, in part, to ECE professionals to whom the new SEL movement may seem in some ways like an effort to repackage and modularize the tenets of whole-child, developmentally appropriate practice upon which their field was built and that they already implement daily. This is important not because of who should be credited with originating the ideas of SEL, but because of the risks of “push-down” of education methods or content (e.g. standardized testing) that were not designed with the youngest children in mind, which early childhood scholars are often concerned about (Elkind, 2005; Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2011). Given the common belief in some quarters that both children and ECE have been hurt by ECE’s growing resemblance to later schooling (Brogaard Clausen, 2015; Kohn, 2014), stakeholders may be right to worry about the unintended consequences of a newfangled SEL zeitgeist—it has even been called an “orthodoxy” (Humphrey, 2013)—to mandate and hold it accountable for the values it already lives by, which paradoxically may serve to undermine them. We attempt to address the question of whether children in ECE settings would be better served over the long term by increasing a specialized focus on SEL content, or by continued and more general quality improvement efforts with a whole-child emphasis, which, by definition, would have as their targets various social and emotional qualities of both classrooms and children. In other words, we are posing the question of whether

ECE “needs” SEL, or whether high-quality ECE is more or less already equivalent to SEL, or at least encompassing of it. This question is important to address because uncertainty remains about the best ways to capitalize on the early years for equalizing opportunity. This is one version of the schoolification debate, but a unique one, since the global SEL movement has derived many of its lessons from the traditions of ECE, such as whole-child development, whereas other versions are concerned with adopting or adapting educational principles or methods that were *not* designed with the youngest children in mind. While other critical reflections on the modern SEL movement are available (e.g. Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013), the present article may be the first to examine these questions specifically from an early childhood perspective.

We broadly define SEL as the explicit and intentional promotion of social and emotional skills and well-being within a non-family context (usually school), and as the appreciation of the equal importance of and symbiosis between social and emotional concerns and academic concerns. In our view, those who engage in SEL do so with an understanding that it does not take away from the curriculum or even need to be “worked in” to the curriculum, but is an integral part of it. While providing a prescription for a singular, optimal form of SEL promotion in ECE is not the focus here, we note that, despite the definitional confusion that is to be expected in any young field, international perspectives on SEL have many more commonalities than differences (Torrente et al., 2015), including the promotion of skills such as self-regulation and problem-solving; self-awareness, empathy, and kindness; coping and resilience; and sense of belonging, agency, and self-worth. At the same time, regardless of whether social-emotional skills promotion is integrated or programmatic, ECE-independent or attached to compulsory school education—which are the primary conundrums being explored here—no approach will address every relevant skill for every child. Thus, the thesis taken here is that those definitional and inclusiveness challenges are exactly those that can be publicly interrogated once the decision is made to bring SEL in ECE from implicit to explicit. Thus, we examine on both theoretical and practical levels the history of how social-emotional concerns have manifested at the pre-primary level and ask the question: Are these outcomes well served in ECE by aligning with the modern SEL movement in compulsory school education?

Should SEL receive separate treatment?

This question is informed by what Martha Minow (1985) has called “the dilemma of difference.” Although her focus is on differences relating to characteristics of people such as ethnicity, race, gender, dis/ability, family language, religion, and so on, the notion is useful for considering SEL because of the cultural asymmetry that exists between the cognitive and emotional in American society and schooling (Weare, 2004), as well as globally (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). In essence, Minow highlights an underlying tension in efforts to create more inclusive and just educational policies and settings, asking in what ways does focusing on people’s differences bring marginalized needs into balance, and in what ways does this specialized attention create unintended consequences, such as reinforcing pre-existing prejudices.

In order to illustrate Minow’s idea, take the US Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, which was a legal attempt to solve the deep social problem of racially segregated schools 347 U.S. 483 (1954). However, if this ruling reversed the practice of “separate but equal” schools for black and white children (i.e. that segregation was allowable as long as “equivalent” schooling was available), why might it be that school segregation persists (Thompson Dorsey, 2013)? While there are any number of plausible explanations, Minow’s view is that this well-intended attention has, perhaps, had the effect of reinscribing racist attitudes (i.e. that children of color are “welcome” in historically white schools only because of their race or ethnicity, or due to government force). A key to Minow’s argument is not that these dilemmas foreclose actions to address inequities but that these efforts must involve conscious reflection on

what is being done, why, and to what effect. According to Minow (1985: 159): “we cannot change our world simply by thinking about it differently, nor can we change it unless we think differently enough to see where we are, and with this sight, act differently.”

We suggest that her broad concept provides a powerful lens for considering the opportunities and risks of explicitly incorporating an all-ages SEL movement into early childhood practice. On the one hand, the rising discourse about SEL, and the importance of social and emotional development to children’s later academic and life chances (Durlak et al., 2011), may mean, for once, that there could be some “push-up.” For example, Dusenbury et al.’s (2014: 2) analysis of the status of state-level SEL standards in both ECE and compulsory school education suggested that the more prevalent preschool-level standards could “serve as a model to states developing K–12 SEL standards.” In turn, ECE could benefit from attaching to the standardization of social-emotional skills promotion, such as by promulgating a less generic and more actionable understanding of “whole-child development,” providing credibility and increased funding, or assuring more accountability for meeting the social-emotional needs of diverse children.

Conversely, there may be consequences of focusing on SEL too much, as well, especially from the perspective of those who feel as though ECE already amply promotes it. For example, embracing SEL in ECE could be an additional avenue for “push-down” and the further atomization of children into domains, standards, objectives, and indicators—all of which, in the current zeitgeist, must be assessed (Elkind, 2005; Meisels, 2007; Stipek, 2006). Or increasingly explicit social and emotional instruction might trivialize the subject through modularization—similar to tokenism with human beings. Or perhaps it might set up (real or perceived) competition between academic learning and social-emotional learning—again, similar to the backlash that has historically arisen when marginalized populations are perceived to have been given special treatment (Minow, 1989). For some, advocating for an SEL-related emphasis to an even greater degree than already exists may create special risks for children who attend preschool primarily to achieve equality in school readiness, which is typically measured by academic skills (e.g. Duncan, 2011). Finally, there is the critical question to be posed to both proponents of leaving ECE “as is” and those in favor of more explicit SEL emphasis: *Whose SEL?* Who sets the norm (Dyson, 1997: 5)? The multicultural and comparative education literature has raised important challenges to notions of universal child development, school readiness, and curricular best practices, highlighting the need for critical reflection on assumptions underlying our positions about diversities and inclusivity (Cannella, 2008; Delpit, 1995; Dyson, 1997). More specific to SEL, comparative research can shed light on how little considered the cultural nature of children’s social and emotional worlds is (e.g. Hayashi et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989). In sum, the dilemma of difference, as applied to the content of SEL, underscores that there are consequences either of “folding in” or of explicitly accentuating the social-emotional aspects of education. The questions addressed here are: How can wisdom from the ECE and SEL traditions be interwoven in the best interests of children? And which path forward creates the best chance for democratic participation in the process? To continue considering these questions, we examine historical trends in ECE’s treatment of social-emotional skill development and, as we will see, the ultimate conclusion about whether ECE really “needs” a new emphasis on SEL may depend on the distance between the ideal and the likely.

Historical SEL threads in ECE: philosophy versus practice

When instruction for two- to five-year-olds began to be something that occurred outside of the home and by non-parents in the 19th century, the purposes were many, and depended on the school of thought, but getting a head start on academics was not commonly one of them (Bagdi and Vacca, 2005; Elkind, 2005). Purposes that were mentioned included exploration, moral instruction, providing a “maternal” environment (such as affection from teachers to children), self-actualization

through play, and increasing social harmony (Beatty, 1995; Johnson, 1936). Thus, ECE was founded on a tradition in which “matters of the heart” were not only emphasized, but also taken extremely seriously, and seen as a “hedge against the future” (Beatty, 1995: 31)—a motivational basis arguably highly similar to that of the modern SEL movement. Accordingly, modern early childhood educators might have some legitimate basis for claiming that if you are “doing it right,” ECE does not require supplementary SEL-related instruction because the entire enterprise provides all the necessary context, content, and skill-building.

The SEL tradition, on the other hand, grew out of the youth development movement in the USA, which shined new light on the fact that US schools were promoting the democratic ideal of “socializ[ing] children to become good citizens,” but inequitably based on race, ethnicity, family language, and social class (Comer, 1988: 42). Comer (1988) underscored that it was psychosocial factors—more so than cognitive or academic ones—that explained persistent achievement gaps by race and income, and that a more justice-centered approach to schooling must explicitly focus on fostering supportive connections between children, families, and educators. In light of Comer’s thesis, consider Dewey’s stance that:

A democracy is more than a form of government, it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience ... so that each has to refer [her] own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to [her] own, is equivalent to breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept [people] from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 2004: 83)

Thus, given enduring structural racism and classism, the neo-liberal turn, the rising sociopolitical moment of reactionary nationalism, and serious global concerns about civil disunion, the defense of (pre)schooling’s social and emotional functions is more than quaint idealism—it is an imperative (Erickson, 2017). Indeed, it may not be an exaggeration to say that a fully realized SEL-based education could impact the ability of future generations to problem-solve, collaborate, bounce back from difficulties, and heal divides (Moreno, 2017).

Most educators have openly espoused schools’ obligation to support whole-child development at all ages (Darling-Hammond, 2015), as well as cultivate a morally engaged citizenry (Freire, 1970; Hantzopoulos, 2011), but advocacy for SEL as content deserving equal time and attention to any other subject has become newly dire across primary and secondary education. This is due to a combination of historical and contemporary forces, including those discussed above, as well as the growing awareness of the devastating effects of trauma (including the potential transgenerational effects of slavery and colonialism (Gone, 2013)), mental illness, violence, school dropout, and substance abuse in students (e.g. Fairbank, 2008), coinciding with the era of punitive accountability in education that emphasized test scores over safe and supportive school environments (O’Day and Smith, 2016). With some notable exceptions, such as Dewey and Freire, SEL needs were arguably not as much a part of the “DNA” of compulsory school education, which has been shaped more by industrial-age, scientific management-based, rational-technical curricular ideals that inform the contemporary standards movement (Kessler and Swadener, 1992). Therefore, the scholars who would ultimately be credited with founding the contemporary SEL field (James Comer, Maurice Elias, Mark Greenberg, Roger Weissberg, etc.) were not operating with the same level of confidence early childhood educators were that SEL needs would be “taken care of” as a natural part of raising educational standards. Consequently, the need to promote SEL as its own enterprise was reinvigorated, and seen as a matter of global urgency to prevent further disenfranchisement of students, teachers, and families (Humphrey, 2013; Shriver and Buffett, 2015).

Nonetheless, despite the clear differences in the strength and duration of an SEL-related emphasis in the *philosophical traditions* of ECE versus compulsory school education, in practice,

ECE has also struggled mightily with implementing a balanced approach across the “whats” and “whens” of schooling, due to historical cross-currents around what ECE is *for*. Indeed, it seems that the more the premise of ECE became to prepare children for later school or workforce performance, and the more ECE was driven by economic imperatives generally, the more the social-emotional needs of children were pushed to the sidelines. This has been evident since at least the 1930s, such as when the Works Progress Administration nurseries created as part of the New Deal were said to have had the “dual goals of helping the economy, and helping young children, in that order” (Beatty, 1995: 177), and thus engaged in inappropriate practices such as harsh discipline, “habit training,” and a lack of play and spontaneous activity (182–183). Bishop-Josef and Zigler (2011) recount a full six “pendulum swings” in the USA between an overly cognitive-academic emphasis and a more balanced approach, including social-emotional concerns, since 1957—a date marked by the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik, which caused US insecurity around its ability to compete globally. Head Start, created in 1965 as part of Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty,” is well known to have involved comprehensive supports for whole-child health and development, but also to have suffered from controversies around using intelligence quotient scores to judge its effectiveness (Zigler, 1979). In the USA, every modern federal-level education initiative that includes Pre-K (Pre-Kindergarten; e.g. Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 and the 2009 Race to the Top initiative) has codified “school readiness” as primarily academic, and as the currency of success of preschool programs (Stipek, 2006). Similar concerns have been raised by ECE scholars in other countries as well, including Canada (e.g. Dachyshyn, 2015), Australia (e.g. Stratigos, 2015), and even Denmark, where a democracy-based approach to ECE is reputed to be stronger than in other industrialized nations (e.g. Brogaard Clausen, 2015). Each of these authors, while not addressing SEL specifically, seems to be acknowledging their country’s stated embracing of the humanity of children and the goal for ECE to build on children’s deep social-emotional capacities, while lamenting that the actual practices in ECE settings have either never fully realized this ideal or have perhaps come close, but are now eroding due to the expansion of pressures to use a neo-liberal cost–benefit analysis to determine the benefits of ECE programming (Brogaard Clausen, 2015).

Thus, it can be broadly stated that social-emotional emphases have been allowed—even welcomed—in ECE, but at least since the 20th century, economic imperatives have coincided with an “infatuation with cognitive development” (Bishop-Josef and Zigler, 2011: 85), tying resources to improvement on academic assessments and treating social-emotional skills as either a mere pathway to academic success or a fortunate “bonus.” This is despite longitudinal research indicating that social-emotional skills in early childhood uniquely predict a number of outcomes related to productive and economic well-being in adulthood, such as educational attainment, employment, and reduced criminal activity and substance abuse (e.g. Jones et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2011).

What is new then, perhaps, from the modern SEL movement is the advocacy for the notion that a purely rational-cognitive approach to education falls short *even if* your purpose is primarily economic. The familiar claims that businesses suffer because their workforce has not been properly educated in matters such as decision-making, self-regulation, problem-solving, and collaboration (Committee for Children, 2016; Goleman, 1995) are part of the imperative that gave rise to theories and terms such as “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995) and “intra- and inter-personal intelligence” (Gardner, 1983). These concepts, which were part of the founding of the modern SEL movement (Humphrey, 2013), are based on a belief that social and emotional skills are not just important parts of humanity (or of a whole child), but constitute *an intelligence*, and are therefore necessary for intellectual, productive, and societally valuable activity. This belief has been supported by evidence, and serves to put SEL-related skills on an equal footing with other forms of intelligence and make them a worthy target for instruction, not only in the early years of life (e.g. Heckman, 2013).

Thus, regardless of the reasons for urgency or the length of time during which SEL principles have dominated, ECE and compulsory school education worldwide currently share a theoretical agreement on the value of intentionally supporting social and emotional development in students, and an ongoing crisis of implementation to realize that value. Given that a lack of attention to SEL-related principles can be harmful either from a purely humanitarian/self-actualization perspective or from a neo-liberal perspective that values the workforce-creation purposes of education (Burns, 2016; Cohen, 2006), it will be helpful to visualize examples of ECE when whole-child development is supported not just in intentions, but also in actuality. In the next section, we consider two well-known, highly influential examples which suggest that some ECE models may have the capacity to meet the full range of outcomes specified by the modern SEL field without incorporating supplementary SEL programming.

Integrative (redundant) SEL in ECE

Vivian Paley is credited with rich educator-as-researcher accounts of a number of key ECE principles, but chief among them was her use of fantasy play and story acting to draw out children's thinking (e.g. Paley, 1992, 2004). As if voicing children and how they relate to personal narratives, Paley (2008) says: "I am intended to have my own ideas. That's why I play the way I do. To show myself what my ideas are, and how necessary I am to the community." In her intentionally ironically entitled *The High-Performing Preschool*, McNamee (2015) mounts a defense of Paley-style teaching methods as being more than sufficiently rigorous for the accountability-in-ECE era because of how seamlessly story acting develops children into public thinkers, problem-solvers, and creators of plots that make inner life into something understandable by others. The emotional stories children reveal about themselves, and the ones they collectively create, are the very stuff of intellectual life (McNamee, 2015). Exploring emotions is the same as exploring ideas—that is to say, emotions *are* intellect in this context. In such a classroom, the curriculum "teaches without instructing" the lessons of kindness, inclusion, ethics, and maintaining self-regulation through sticky situations and stressful times.

This is a teaching style that was most intentional in Paley's (1992) book *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, in which she conducted an experiment in helping children reconcile what is good for the individual with what is good for the group (Cooper, 2009)—perhaps the ultimate challenge of the SEL movement. Paley herself varies in talking about these strategies as both implicit, meaning embedded in the subtleties of teacher-child interactions, and explicit and intentional "lessons." For example, in an interview about her book *The Kindness of Children* (1999), Paley says: "Every child knows loneliness. But because I have been lonely, do I recognize the plight of others who are lonely? That's more subtle, and that's where the artistry comes in, where the modeling comes in" (Wingert, 1999). In contrast, at the end of that book, she says to a group of children:

What if we got in the habit of talking about [kindness] every day, the way we examine our sentences to see if the grammar is correct? Kindness and the opposite of kindness. Wouldn't we react more quickly when someone is being hurt? Wouldn't we become more sensitive to each other's feelings? (Paley, 1999: 128)

This continuum of strategies underscores the notion that the teaching of social and emotional skills can be intentional and even metacognitive without being modular or compartmentalized, and indeed that in an idealized Paley-esque classroom, an SEL "program" would likely be redundant.

The Reggio Emilia style of education is another ECE model whose prioritization of social and emotional skill development is woven into the fabric of everyday activities. Rather than fantasy play or story acting, immersive, multifaceted, and child-initiated projects serve as the fulcrum of education. The

objective is to use collaboration to create beautiful and/or informative products, and document the process in public fashion so that teachers, children, parents, and the community co-own the work (Malaguzzi, 1993). The founder of Reggio Emilia education, Loris Malaguzzi (1993: 9), states that the key goal is to create “an amiable school” where “children, teachers, and families feel a sense of well-being.” Using Dewey-based notions that were the inspiration for both Paley and Reggio education, Malaguzzi further states that “the supportive atmosphere of the school is by principle open and democratic, inviting exchange of ideas and suppressing distance between people; thus, in all circumstances the school maintains its effectiveness and a welcoming feeling to all concerned” (10). A radical idea related to social-emotional development that is also shared by Paley and Malaguzzi is that perhaps school best prepares children for life *not* by imitating it (Cooper, 2009; Malaguzzi, 1993; Paley, 1992)—that is, school itself ought to create a special sense of belonging and self-efficacious identity development precisely because these advantages may not be replicated everywhere in the real world. In short, although Reggio education may lean somewhat more toward the academic than Paley’s preschool classrooms did, both models place a high degree of importance on emotional and social development, view these skills as foundational for learning and for the socially just functioning of classrooms, and have an intentional and explicit, but non-programmatic and embedded stance towards an integrated pedagogy of SEL.

The Montessori and Waldorf approaches, though perhaps somewhat less prominently than Paley or Reggio classrooms, also feature their own versions of embedded SEL. Although Montessori education and Waldorf education are often thought of as philosophical opposites (Peterson, 2010), their respective spiritual components of “cosmic education” and anthroposophy are interestingly similar and share an emphasis on a sense of “oneness,” such as among children, between children and teachers, and between children and the environment. Montessori’s “Grace and Courtesy” component suggests “how social relations become the basis for community life” (Sackett, 2015: 114), and Steiner’s (1982, 1998) original writings convey a vision for educating for a just and peaceful society, and an equal prioritization of “soul” and feelings with academic learning. However, it is not quite clear from either original or more modern writings how either of these approaches trains or supports teachers around alternative modes of expression of SEL skills, such as less “orderly” styles (Lillard, 2016) in the case of Montessori, or children who prefer realistic over imaginary play (Edwards, 2002) in the case of Waldorf. Such supra-curricular modifications would likely require the finesse of highly skilled teachers attuned to the creation of equitable classrooms.

In short, we can answer with a resounding yes that holistic integration of the full range of SEL principles is *possible* in ECE, and in such settings supplementary SEL programming would be redundant at best, and could be damaging at worst. Nevertheless, this ideal is not a given in all ECE philosophies, even if we can assume optimal implementation of models that have made significant contributions to what we now know as whole-child, developmentally appropriate practice. Furthermore, these idealized models have not been subjected to the level of evidentiary scrutiny to which manualized preschool programs and curricula have been in recent years, which may also be one of the reasons why even wider access to them has not been achieved. As such, we now turn to the modern evidence base to evaluate whether or not structured SEL programming has proven its worth as a supplement to ECE.

Modern SEL within ECE: the state of the art

The blurred lines between the constructs of SEL and ECE—and therefore the extent to which SEL can rightly be judged as a supplement in the first place—are evident from the perspective of the SEL evidence base as well. For example, in the 2013 CASEL guide to effective SEL programs that have a Pre-K level and have also conducted rigorous research at that level, two of seven programs deemed effective (High/Scope and Tools of the Mind) are not SEL programs per se, but rather comprehensive preschool curricula, one or more domains of which are relevant to SEL-related

skills. This interpretation is further evidenced by the fact that these are also the only two of the seven programs that are indicated *not* to include “explicit [SEL] skills instruction” and to focus instead on “teacher instructional practices” (Collaborative, 2013: 23).

In our own updated review of the empirical literature of preschool-level SEL programs (since the CASEL review is approximately five years old), we found 13 programs that explicitly referred to themselves as an SEL program and that have been subjected to at least one evaluation with a control group. Of these, eight could be characterized as using metacognitive, teacher-delivered “lessons” (e.g. Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Domitrovich et al., 1999)), three could be characterized as focused more on teachers’ relational and behavior management skills (e.g. Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton and Herman, 2010)), and the final two might be considered hybrid strategies, with an explicit purpose and time set aside for social and emotional activities, but not necessarily in the form of scripted lessons, such as the use of yoga or mindfulness (e.g. YogaKids (Razza et al., 2015)). Most of the studies found positive results, especially with respect to social skills and behavior problems, but academic benefits were rarely found. However, several of the studies did not employ random assignment, had very small sample sizes, or both. Using the most stringent criteria thus far for Pre-K SEL programs (i.e. multiple randomized trials where at least one was conducted by an independent researcher rather than the program designer), Bierman and Motamedi (2015) found that only two programs—Incredible Years and PATHS—could be deemed effective, and three additional programs were characterized as “promising” (Tools of the Mind, I Can Problem Solve, and AI’s Pals). Interestingly, these authors contemplate the different possible effects of more explicit/lesson-based versus more implicit/teaching-quality-based approaches, concluding that each can be effective for different purposes. Embedded approaches may be better for the developmental phase of preschool itself to stimulate foundational social-emotional competencies such as emotional awareness, whereas programmatic, metacognitive approaches may better support longer-term outcomes related to meeting the challenges of elementary school (Bierman and Motamedi, 2015).

Despite a reasonable number of promising programs and outcomes indicating that structured SEL programming can benefit preschool children, note that the control groups in these studies were employing practices as usual—that is, “standard” ECE classrooms and curricula, which were unlikely on average to rival the quality of idealized, integrative (but non-programmatic) SEL, such as within Reggio classrooms, as evidenced by average or worse levels of overall quality found in a multitude of seminal classroom quality studies in ECE (e.g. Early et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). It could simply be the case that SEL programming improves outcomes over average ECE contexts generally through the various training, coaching, and reflection opportunities provided. This is further support for the premise of this article—that is, that high-quality ECE in general and effective SEL for preschoolers are greatly overlapping notions, not just philosophically, but also in practice. Classroom and teaching quality is necessarily impacted in each, and therefore naming SEL does not necessarily mean modularizing it.

Thus, in recent years, despite a keen awareness of the long-standing socially and emotionally based philosophical and scientific traditions of ECE, early childhood researchers have found that supplementing ECE with structured SEL programming has not artificially compartmentalized ECE, but rather has counter-intuitively helped to fulfill whole-child principles in the real world. This has been motivated by desires to counteract the incomplete picture of child development created by punitive accountability, and also to scale the positive effects of seminal ECE research, such as the national Head Start study (US Department of Health, 2010) and the Perry Preschool project (Schweinhart et al., 2005), which has proven elusive. For example, recent ECE research initiatives in the USA, including the Head Start Research Based, Developmentally Informed intervention (Bierman et al., 2008), Foundations of Learning (Morris et al., 2013), SECURE PreK (Jones and Bailey, 2014), and Connect4Learning (Sarama et al., 2017), all incorporate explicit SEL modules

along with academic content, in part as a *means of* improving overall quality that might be more easily replicable in practice. Bringing attention and structure to SEL principles is thus increasingly being seen as necessary for realizing the ideals of ECE. Therefore, due to an undoubtedly complex combination of factors, including repetitive defaulting of policy to overly cognitive definitions of school readiness, low levels of education, training, and pay for most preschool teachers, and stressful work environments where teachers' own social-emotional needs may be neglected (Zinsser and Curby, 2014), an explicit, specialized, and even modular focus on SEL may be a necessary part of achieving the ideals of whole-child development on a broad scale.

Conclusion: it is a matter of advocacy

In order to answer the question of whether ECE “needs” SEL or whether high-quality implementations of ECE essentially equate to SEL (and therefore striving for wider and deeper quality is more important than adding SEL components), we must consider the ECE landscape on both theoretical and practical levels. From our vantage point, present conditions suggest against relying on the “redundancy” between ECE and SEL to support and nurture children’s self-actualization, and towards a cautious acceptance of supplementary SEL curricula within ECE. First, even prominent, idealized forms of ECE are not philosophically consistent with regard to integrated coverage of essential SEL skills and experiences. Like the “dilemma of difference,” simply stating that all needs ought to be met, as is implied with the term “whole-child approach,” not only glosses over the fact that practices—even notably progressive ones—allow the ignoring of certain needs more easily than others, but also rests on problematic universalist assumptions about who that whole child is and who gets to decide what is best for her (Cannella, 2008; Delpit, 1995; Dyson, 1997). When resources are tight, or when political forces are uncertain, most schooled cultures have defaulted to a lopsidedly academic or otherwise “mainstream” approach, and disincentivized meaningful expenditure of resources on inclusive support of social and emotional concerns. This is true despite the now plentiful evidence that early social-emotional skill promotion uniquely predicts many conventional indicators of school and life success as well.

Similarly, at the practical level, we know that children’s access to classrooms providing seamlessly integrated rigorous learning opportunities and holistic social-emotional nurturance—such as may have been found in Paley’s classrooms or in the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy—is not abundant, especially in the USA (Herman et al., 2013). Of course, we are under no delusions that adding a programmatic SEL module to a typical ECE classroom serves to change average teachers into stellar ones. Indeed, not surprisingly, research shows that moderate-quality Pre-K teachers will rely more on SEL programs in “by the book” and modular ways, whereas higher-quality teachers will integrate SEL lessons more smoothly into their own interactional style (Zinsser et al., 2014). Nevertheless, scaling such high-quality preschool programming has proven extremely difficult, and recent preschool intervention research incorporating explicit SEL curricula is showing promise for both classroom- and child-level outcomes (Jones and Bailey, 2014) that meet the ideals of whole-child development. Such programs may be the best examples to date of successfully scaling key features of Paley-like or Reggio-like classrooms. In essence, this research suggests that “embedded” and “modular” SEL are not all that far apart in reality. Being specific, it appears, is necessary to realize the general ideal, but continued advocacy for the uniqueness of early childhood is necessary to prevent specificity from morphing into rigidity.

On the debate about whether non-academic, value-laden content ought to be taught in schools, Alfie Kohn (1997: 6) has said that “the question is about as sensible as asking whether our bodies should be allowed to contain bacteria.” Values and social-emotional skills will be imparted in schools whether

implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally. Every choice, or lack of choice, will leave out or mischaracterize some skills, for at least some children, for at least some of the time. While there is no single optimal prescription, we have argued that a public and explicit choice of a documented SEL approach, though not risk-free, is preferable to an assumption of redundancy or coverage in that it brings the decisions out of the shadows and into the public sphere. In turn, values and methods can be questioned, tweaked, or eliminated, individualized, and course-corrected.


While the above suggests that ECE has more to gain than to lose from adding SEL programs, what about the concerns about downward pressure from compulsory school education that are involved in embracing the broader SEL movement? Surely we are not suggesting that the possibility for public interrogation means that just any type of explicit SEL choice is acceptable, especially within ECE? While a full treatment of the ECE– compulsory school education alignment debate is beyond the scope of this discussion (e.g. see Moss, 2013), both ECE scholars concerned about push-down and compulsory school education scholars concerned about youth disenfranchisement converge on some ideas for what “cautious” might look like within “cautious acceptance” of SEL. Specifically, they commonly raise the notion of *democracy*—that is, elevating the voice and agency of all stakeholders to foster school cultures of connectedness that have improved academics as a by-product rather than the primary focus (Comer, 1988). Several perspectives exist on how this potential balance—between choosing some values to teach and yet allowing those same values to be questioned—might be achieved. Kohn (1997) offers that a program focusing on such constructs as “empathy and skepticism” might do well to both teach children needed skills and preserve their agency. Brogaard Clausen (2015) emphasizes that “regimens” (or programs) *can* be employed in ECE but only when diverse parents, staff, and children participate as decision-makers, not “implementers.” Hyde and LaPrad (2015: 5) discuss how a mindfulness-based angle on SEL can support youth in becoming advocates for social justice, because mindfulness “seeks to identify and transform the oppressor within, the conditioning and unexamined biases that keep us from being fully aware of how we are complicit in maintaining inequitable structures, even those that constrain our own being and action.” Similarly, McKay-Jackson (2014: 293) also cautiously accepts the value of SEL, but discusses how, through civic engagement projects, school programs can reduce their focus on “containment” in favor of “sociopolitical development.” While these latter two examples are not early childhood-specific, both mindfulness and civic engagement approaches have been employed successfully in this age range (e.g. Astuto and Ruck, 2010; Flook et al., 2015) and improved outcomes such as kindness, which is a clear foundation for more advanced notions of social justice.

In short, a conscious choice for ECE to align with the SEL movement and simultaneously advocate for important values in that process is likely preferable to the global schoolification of ECE that has been happening for decades regardless. On the compulsory school education side, particularly the primary grades, embracing ECE can help assure that SEL is not merely a token effort to “back-pedal” on problems created by the system of schooling itself. Perhaps given the collective advantages across the two sectors, such as powerful longitudinal research and strong parent involvement in ECE, and centralized funding structures in compulsory school education, leveraging SEL as a means for increasing student voice and agency becomes more possible. In the current geopolitical climate, ECE stakeholders would be wise to proactively maintain their seat at the table during this moment of “equal rights” for social and emotional education.

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ORCID iD

Amanda Moreno  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8838-1239>

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Author biographies

Amanda J Moreno is an Assistant Professor of child development at Erikson Institute in Chicago, IL, USA. She directs Erikson's online master's degree specialization in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and conducts research on how teachers and parents can use social and emotional supports to ease the transition to formal learning in preschool through second grade. Currently, she is the Principal Investigator of a randomized trial examining the effectiveness of a mindfulness-based SEL intervention in 30 Chicago Public Schools.

Mark K Nagasawa is an Assistant Professor of social work and child development Erikson Institute. His research applies a cultural studies lens to education policy-making examining how official policy/discourses are negotiated and embodied in bureaucracies, classrooms, and professionals' relationships with parents. Dr. Nagasawa currently leads multiple projects exploring how early childhood stakeholders leverage data to increase awareness and equity of services in their communities.

Toby Schwartz is a Research Assistant at the Erikson Institute, where she studied Child Development with a specialization in Children with Special Needs. She is interested in early childhood development, social-emotional learning (SEL), and the adaptation of SEL and mindfulness-based interventions for use with children with special needs. Toby also holds a Master's degree in Social Work from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, where she specialized in Family Support.