Prioritizing Mental Well-being in Emerging Educational Models: Strategies for Integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to Support Student Mental Health

Dimani Jayatissa iD
Trinity Western University, Canada

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Article Info	Abstract
	This paper conducts a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices into emerging educational models to support student mental well-being, with a particular focus on Canadian contexts. Employing a systematic literature review methodology, the study utilized Google Scholar as the primary database, filtering results based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, emphasizing relevance, quality, and recency. The main findings underscore a research gap between acknowledgment of the importance of SEL, and its implementation in Canadian schools. Strategies for integrating SEL into educational settings are reviewed, highlighting ongoing initiatives of British Columbia aimed at advancing SEL within teacher training programs and educational policies. The study also highlights escalating concerns regarding the mental health of Canadian children and youth, impaired by the COVID-19 pandemic. Implications for educational policy and practice, including promoting systematic assessment of students' social-emotional skills and ensuring the appropriate developmental delivery of SEL through content, are emphasized as key considerations for educational policymakers and practitioners. The paper concludes that a holistic approach is advocated for fostering Canadian children and youth's social-emotional skills, crucial for their well-being and success in educational settings.

Introduction

A growing body of research highlights the influence of social-emotional skills on critical life outcomes including high school and college completion rates, adult employment prospects, and overall well-being, including physical and mental health (Krachman et al., 2017, p. 4). In support of this notion, recent studies emphasize the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) for success in education, college entry, completion, and future earnings (Denham & Brown, 2010; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). However, despite substantial investments in the K-12 curriculum, there remains a limited understanding of how integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) impacts students' social-emotional development (Krachman et al., 2017, p. 4).

Educators universally recognize the significance of nurturing students' social-emotional skills. A comprehensive survey involving over 20,000 public school teachers revealed that 99% of educators recommend the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies alongside academic instruction (Krachman et al., 2017, p. 5). Notably, this study emphasized that implementing SEL in schools and districts will effectively mitigate negative behaviours and address the needs of students struggling with social-emotional deficits (Krachman et al., 2017, p. 4).

Despite this recognition, the allocation of time to SEL remains insufficient. On average, teachers dedicate 4.3 hours per week to SEL activities, representing approximately 8% of their total working hours both inside and outside the classroom (Krachman et al., 2017, p. 4). This discrepancy prompts a critical question: If SEL fosters self-esteem, positive decision-making, and the cultivation of meaningful relationships in students, why have we not universally adopted SEL standards in every Canadian school? (Menor, 2018).The integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices presents a significant opportunity for strengthening the psychological well-being of students. As Canada experiences mental health challenges among youth, prioritizing SEL is a crucial investment for the overall well-being of students. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health disorders are projected to become the world's leading cause of disability by 2030 (People for Education, 2023).

Statistics Canada data reveal an overall decline in the mental health of young people aged 12 to 17 across the country. In 2019, 73% of adolescents in this age group described their mental health as very good or excellent (People for Education, 2023). However, by 2022, that number had decreased to 61% (People for Education, 2023). Furthermore, among children and youth aged 5 to 17, 17% reported poor or fair mental health, and 5% had a diagnosed anxiety disorder (Statistics Canada, 2022).In Ontario, a concerning 39% of high-school students indicate a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress, characterized by symptoms of anxiety and depression (CAMH, n.d.). Additionally, 17% of students report a serious level of psychological distress (CAMH, n.d.). Meanwhile, in British Columbia, approximately one in seven young people—or 14%—will experience a mental illness at some point (CMHA British Columbia, 2023). Notably, 50% to 70% of mental illnesses manifest before the age of 18 significantly impacting a child's development (CMHA British Columbia, 2023).Despite global advancements in education systems, the continuation of mental illness challenges expectations. A comprehensive strategy that harmonizes educational enhancements with focused mental health support is crucial for nurturing individual well-being. Thus, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices into emerging educational models as a strategy for supporting student mental health, specifically addressing the question: How does the integration of social and emotional learning (SEL) practices into emerging educational models impact student mental well-being?

Literature Review

This section provides an overview of two fundamental concepts: mental well-being and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Subsequently, it explores the integration of these concepts within emerging education models.

Mental Well-Being: Insights and Trends Among Canadian Children and Youth

The concept of mental health refers to an individual's ability to think, feel, and behave in ways that promote life satisfaction, effective coping, and positive emotional and spiritual well-being (University of Calgary, n.d.). The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of overall well-being where individuals can realize their potential, manage life stressors, work productively, and contribute to their community (Peel Public Health, 2018).Survey findings and empirical research highlight the escalating concern and challenge of addressing the mental health needs of Canadian children and youth. In Canada, an estimated 14% to 25% of children and youth are affected by a mental health disorder (Rodger et al., 2014, p.4). Furthermore, nearly one in five postsecondary students report mental health issues, with approximately 11% experiencing suicidal thoughts (Wiens et al., 2019, p.31). This issue extends beyond K-12 education, as 20% of Canadian university students have reported diagnoses or treatment for mental health conditions (University of Calgary, n.d.).

Statistics Canada reports that youth face heightened risks of poor mental health during the pandemic, compared to other age groups. The closure of schools nationwide disrupted educational processes, with the shift to online learning adversely affecting students' academic performance and mental health (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020). This trend is supported by Moghimi et al. (2023), who observed that the COVID-19 pandemic deteriorated the mental health conditions of post-secondary students (p.2).

Notably, the rate of hospitalization for mental disorders increased from 21% in 2019 to 23% in 2020, indicating a significant impact of the pandemic on mental health (Canadian Institute for Health Information, n.d.). Additionally, in 2020, nearly 1 in 4 hospitalizations for individuals aged 5 to 24 were related to mental health conditions (Canadian Institute for Health Information, n.d.). Moreover, the percentage of students experiencing feelings of depression about the future since the onset of the pandemic has risen to 59% (People for Education, 2023).

Figures 1 and 2 depict the proportion of students reporting significant psychological distress, alongside the prevalence of mood and anxiety medication usage among the ages 5 to 24, respectively.
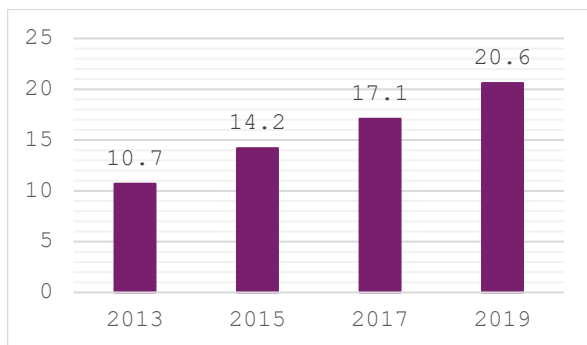

Figure 1. Percentage of Students Indicating serious Psychological Distress, 2013 - 2019
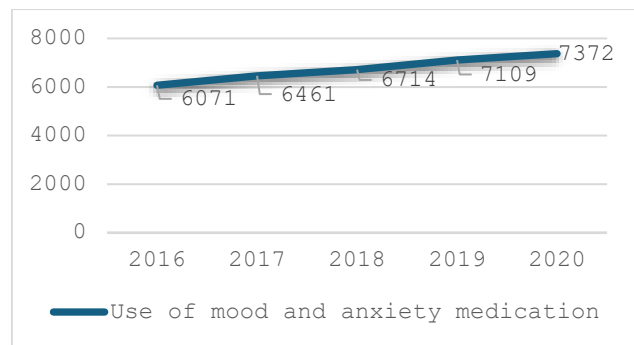Source: Boak et al. (2020)

Figure 2. Use of Mood and Anxiety Medication by Children and Youth Aged 5 to 24 between 2016 - 2020.
Source: Canadian Institute for Health Information. (n.d.).

Since its emergence in the early 1990s, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been recognized as a key component of North American education, with research confirming its role in promoting positive health behaviours (Hoffman, 2009, p.533; Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p.138). Studies further indicate that developing SEL skills in early childhood is closely linked to improved outcomes in adulthood including success in education, career, and personal development (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p.4).

SEL: Meaning and Overview

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) characterizes Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a vital developmental process where both children and adults cultivate the essential knowledge, attitudes, and skills for emotional understanding, goal setting, empathy, relationship building, and responsible decision-making (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p.1). While SEL shares similarities with frameworks like positive youth development, emotional intelligence, and character education, it remains distinct in its focus and application (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p.3). Grounded in comprehensive research, CASEL outlines five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which together form the foundation of effective social and emotional learning (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Figure 3. Interactive CASEL Wheel
Source: CASEL (2023a)

Figure 3 illustrates CASEL's identification of five key social and emotional competencies, each comprising several skills. These include *self-awareness*, which involves recognizing one's emotions and their influence on behaviour; *self-management*, which focuses on emotional and behavioural regulation, goal setting, and perseverance; *social awareness*, the capacity to empathize and understand diverse perspectives alongside social norms; *relationship skills*, which enables forming healthy connections through effective communication and

conflict resolution; and *responsible decision-making* which emphasizes ethical behaviour and its impact on others (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p.4).

Making a Case For SEL: Key Findings and Their Impact on Well-Being

SEL offers a critical avenue for schools to support students experiencing emotional distress, recognizing that such states can significantly hinder learning (Menor, 2018, p.6). The broad consensus among students, educators, and families highlights the importance of integrating SEL in educational settings. This is further validated by numerous surveys that acknowledge its benefits for the holistic development of young people across diverse backgrounds (CASEL, 2023b; Zins & Elias, 2007, p.237).For instance, 93% of parents view SEL as crucial, with two-thirds considering it extremely or very important (Pew Research Center, 2022). Additionally, 81% of parents desire continued or increased SEL instruction for their children (Benenson Strategy Group, 2022). Teachers also support SEL, 90% agreeing it enhances academic achievement (Hamilton & Doss, 2020), and 96% of school administrators believe SEL is as vital as academic learning (McGraw Hill, 2018). However, 51% of human resources professionals feel education systems inadequately address skills gaps like problem-solving and communication (Wilkie, 2019), underscoring a need for SEL. Furthermore, 76% of high school students express a desire for schools that prioritize SEL for personal benefit (DePaoli et al., 2018). However, despite recognizing the advantages of SEL-focused education, many high school students and recent graduates think their schools fell short of effectively implementing SEL (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Research across various disciplines confirms that SEL contributes to improvements in social and emotional skills, academic achievement, mental health, positive behaviours, school environment, and long-term success (CASEL, 2023c; Zins & Elias, 2007). Although SEL is not a substitute for specialized mental health interventions, it plays a crucial role in fostering protective factors that support well-being and safety in schools (CASEL, 2023c). Engagement in SEL programs is associated with reduced emotional distress, enhanced self-perception, better attitudes toward others, and a decrease in behavioural issues and disciplinary actions (CASEL, 2023c). SEL improves coping mechanisms, resilience, and emotional awareness in youth, potentially easing depression, and anxiety symptoms (CASEL, 2023c). Participants in SEL programs experience heightened safety, support, improved teacher relationships, and a greater sense of belonging and inclusivity at school (CASEL, 2023c). Additionally, SEL is effective in decreasing bullying and aggression (CASEL, 2023c).

Integrating SEL in Modern Education: A Tool to Promoting Student Mental Well-Being

CASEL outlines four key strategies for implementing SEL in schools: direct social-emotional skill instruction, integrating SEL in academic content, creating a supportive learning environment, and teaching practices that promote SEL (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p. 3). Despite growing interest, SEL frequently remains isolated from key school policies like discipline, assessment, and teacher development (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 7). SEL's impact is maximized when its content and delivery are developmentally appropriate (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 8). Supporting this, DePaoli et al. (2018) argue that SEL's benefits are enhanced through effective implementation and integration within educational settings, yet often, even with high-quality SEL programs, its incorporation into

classrooms remains insufficient.

Advancing SEL in the BC Curriculum: A Concise Integration Overview

The Mental Health in Schools Strategy, initiated by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (refer to Figure 4), introduces a comprehensive method that integrates positive mental health throughout the educational system, encompassing its culture, leadership, curriculum, and learning environments. This approach is aligned with two provincial initiatives: ERASE (Expect Respect and a Safe Education) and A Pathway to Hope, which aim to improve mental health and addiction services in BC (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.). Central to the strategy are three pillars: *Compassionate Systems Leadership, Capacity Building,* and *Mental Health in the Classroom,* all of which are underpinned by a decade-long evolution of social-emotional learning in BC (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.). Drawing on research and a working group's analysis of COVID-19's mental health impacts, this resource was created to enhance the K-12 Recovery Plan to promote mental health in schools during the 2021/22 academic year (BC Centre for Disease Control & Ministry of Education, 2021).
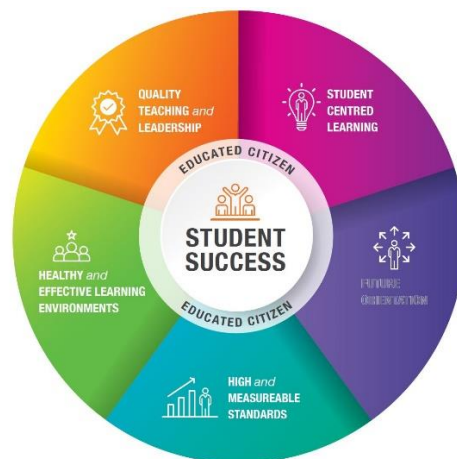

Figure 4. The Ministry of Education's Policy for Student Success
Source: British Columbia Ministry of Education. (n.d.).

In British Columbia, universities and community organizations are jointly advancing SEL and mental health in educational settings. Notably, the University of British Columbia-Vancouver (UBC-V) and Simon Fraser University (SFU) have incorporated SEL into their teacher training programs (Hymel et al., 2017). UBC-V's faculty and graduate students, in partnership with various foundations, have developed the SEL Resource Finder, a digital platform for educators to explore SEL and mental health resources (Hymel et al., 2017). Additionally, the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at UBC-V and the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education are key contributors, with HELP promoting SEL through advocacy and the development of the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) for monitoring children's social-emotional well-being (Hymel et al., 2017).

Despite considerable initiatives to advance SEL in BC, a notable research gap exists in its integration, primarily due to educational practices. The challenges include inconsistent incorporation of SEL into teacher training, the lack of obligatory SEL professional development, and insufficient systematic evaluation of SEL's progress and

efficacy (Hymel et al., 2017). Addressing these gaps is crucial for the effective and enduring promotion of positive mental health through SEL in educational settings.

Systematic Literature Review Process

This paper outlines a systematic literature review process, adhering to the transparent and detailed reporting guidelines set by Barhate and Dirani (2021). It explains the search strategy, screening methods, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria used. The research began with identifying relevant literature on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Student Mental Well-Being, primarily through Google Scholar. Search terms included "social emotional learning", "social emotional skills", "mental well-being", "student mental health, Canada", "mental health British Columbia", and "SEL British Columbia". Following this, a detailed review was carried out, selecting the most relevant journal articles and sources on SEL and student mental well-being.

The inclusion criteria for this study were: Articles must focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and student mental well-being, with relevant keywords in their abstracts. Both published books and industry reports were included to provide a foundation for evidence-based research. The study specifically targets SEL and student mental well-being in North America, with a focus on British Columbia, Canada, limiting the literature review to this geographical scope. Following the inclusion criteria, the *exclusion criteria applied were* the exclusion of content not related to SEL and student mental well-being in North America. Omission of articles focusing on 21st-century frameworks other than SEL. Removal of industrial reports lacking specific information on youth mental well-being

Discussion

The findings presented in the study underline the critical importance of addressing the mental well-being of students within the educational context, particularly in light of escalating concerns regarding mental health among youth, impaired by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lawlor et al., 2023). The data reveals a concerning trend of declining mental health indicators among Canadian children and youth, as evidenced by statistics indicating an increase in psychological distress and diagnosed anxiety disorders (Statistics Canada, 2022; Lawlor et al., 2023). Specifically, nearly 20% of Canadian adolescents aged 15 to 17 described their mental health as "fair" or "poor," while approximately 25% of Canadian parents observed a negative impact on their children's mental health due to the pandemic (Lawlor et al., 2023).

The introduction of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emerges as a promising avenue for addressing these challenges. SEL, characterized by its focus on fostering essential social and emotional competencies, has obtained recognition in North American education over the past few decades (Hoffman, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The literature review highlights the foundational principles of SEL and its significant potential to promote positive health behaviours, academic success, and overall well-being among students (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

Despite the growing acknowledgment of the importance of SEL, there remains a gap between recognition and

implementation. While educators universally endorse the integration of SEL competencies in education, the actual allocation of time to SEL activities remains insufficient (Krachman et al., 2017). This raises questions about the barriers and challenges hindering the widespread adoption of SEL standards in Canadian schools.

Furthermore, the discussion delves into the specific strategies for integrating SEL into educational settings, emphasizing the need for comprehensive approaches that extend beyond direct instruction to include integration into academic content, creating supportive learning environments, and fostering teaching practices that promote SEL (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). The examples provided by British Columbia highlight ongoing initiatives aimed at advancing SEL within teacher training programs and educational policies, underscoring the importance of systematic efforts to address gaps and challenges in SEL implementation (Hymel et al., 2017).

In light of the emerging mental health crisis among students and educators, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion emphasizes the urgent need for evidence-based interventions to support well-being within educational settings (Lawlor et al., 2023). SEL emerges as a well-supported and scientifically endorsed approach to promoting resilience, well-being, and academic achievement among students. As such, the findings emphasize the importance of prioritizing SEL integration into emerging educational models as a strategy for supporting student mental well-being.

Conclusion and Implications for the Future

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices into emerging educational models as a strategy for supporting student mental well-being, specifically addressing the question of how the integration of SEL practices impacts student mental well-being. The findings from the study have significant implications for educational policy and practice. Firstly, the study highlights the critical role of integrating SEL practices into emerging educational models as a means of supporting student mental well-being. The evidence presented in the literature review demonstrates that SEL contributes to improvements in social and emotional skills, academic achievement, mental health, positive behaviours, and overall well-being. This highlights the potential of SEL to address the escalating mental health challenges faced by Canadian children and youth, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies that harmonize educational enhancements with focused mental health support.

Secondly, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing the existing research gaps and challenges in integrating SEL into educational settings. The study highlights the inconsistent incorporation of SEL into teacher training, the lack of obligatory SEL professional development, and insufficient systematic evaluation of SEL's progress and efficacy. Addressing these gaps is crucial for the effective and enduring promotion of positive mental health through SEL in educational settings.

Additionally, the study points to the need for comprehensive strategies that integrate SEL into key school policies like discipline, assessment, and teacher development, as well as the importance of ensuring that SEL content and

delivery are developmentally appropriate. Finally, the findings suggest that education policies should promote the systematic assessment of students' social-emotional skills. This will help evaluate the effectiveness of current SEL investments in enhancing students' skills and guide data-driven decisions on SEL instructional methods.

The study conclusively demonstrates the benefits of incorporating SEL practices into new educational models for enhancing student mental well-being. It highlights the necessity for strategies that align educational improvements with targeted mental health support and stresses the importance of overcoming research and implementation challenges in SEL integration. The findings advocate for a holistic approach to fostering Canadian children and youth's social-emotional skills, crucial for their well-being and success.

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Author Information

Dimani Jayatissa

https://orcid.org/ 0009-0003-6699-0924

Trinity Western University

22500 University Dr, Langley Twp, British Columbia V2Y 1Y1

Canada

Contact e-mail: *todimani@gmail.com*