

## Embracing Social and Emotional Learning in K-12 Schools and Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Emine Tunc**

Harmony School of Endeavor, USA

**Nausheen Hossain**

Austin Community College, USA

**Arkasama Bandyopadhyay**

Texas A&M University, USA

**Ambereen Haq**

Austin Community College, USA

**Yetkin Yildirim**

Rice University, USA

### Abstract

In the spring of 2020, educational institutions in the United States switched to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This learning transition has hampered education productivity and negatively impacted social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. Social and emotional learning typically refers to five areas of competence: self-confidence, relationship skills, social awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Lack of SEL is likely to impede student social and emotional development, which can lead to poor performance both inside and outside the classroom. To prevent this, many classrooms are trying to increase student SEL in a variety of ways, including interactive workspaces and online discussion forums. This shift to SEL learning within the virtual learning environment has placed great amounts of stress upon educators as they learn to adapt to this atmosphere. Promoting SEL should be a matter of importance even within remote learning as disruptions brought by COVID-19 can prove damaging to the emotional and mental health of both students and teachers. Providing teachers with professional SEL training and forming organizations within school districts that are solely responsible for effective SEL implementation can aid this purpose. Finally, SEL is not only beneficial in K-12 education but also in higher education. Through SEL, college students are provided with a variety of life skills that prove to be imperative as they progress through their educational journeys.

**Keywords:** social and emotional learning, student performance, communication, digital divide



## **What is SEL?**

Social emotional learning (SEL), has invariably played a prominent role in children's education. This type of education teaches children to manage their emotions and learn how to deal with social processes. As it is typically defined, SEL covers five areas of competency: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

The first of these competencies, self-awareness, refers to how students understand their own emotions and thoughts (Garcia, n.d). Self-management, the next competency, entails the students' ability to stay organized and orderly when taking responsibility for their own work. The third SEL competency is social awareness, which educators teach by emphasizing the ability to comprehend and empathize with diverse cultures, values, and behavioral norms. Fourth, SEL also promotes relationship skills, specifically the ability to nurture healthy relationships with others such as family, friends, teachers, acquaintances, romantic partners, etc. This competency allows for better communication with others in everyday life. The last competency covered by SEL is decision-making. Defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): responsible decision-making is "the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms." Responsible decision-making is a necessary ability for students to start learning even from young ages, even for small decisions such as choosing what to eat. When these five competencies are taught, students are able to achieve well rounded social and emotional capabilities that aid them not only in school but also in their day-to-day lives. But education of these competencies is hindered when the classroom setting shifts online.

## **Communicating with SEL**

Communication and information transfer facilitate the diffusion of knowledge as well as the development and maintenance of relationships. Communication, as well as education, are the foundations of positive and healthy partnerships. As schools closed their doors due to COVID-19 in early 2020, problems regarding how to communicate successfully in a digital environment became more pressing. Educators began looking for ways to use technology-based communication to teach the same topics and transmit the same information. Communication with their school community and students became challenging and sometimes neglected as teachers took on the challenge of teaching in a new way.

Character development in the classroom can be supplemented by a variety of techniques. When it comes to effective communication in education, the first thing that springs to mind is the use of proper language and spelling. This is important, but it's also about paying attention and being perceptive while listening, expressing responses clearly and alertly, and recognizing and honoring differences. These are important aspects of communication that help to establish and maintain relationships. Students must learn to be alert, comprehend others, and respond in a courteous manner in order to share their own thoughts and opinions. Learning to confront differences is essential for creating a secure environment in which individuals can disagree while still having a clear discourse.

There are a variety of techniques to teach SEL communication. To transmit concepts, one technique is to concentrate on the tone and tempo of speech. Pausing during transitions and maintaining eye contact while conversing with another person were examples of this. These SEL communication approaches can be taught in an interactive fashion by having students discuss goals for improving their communication skills. These objectives can be tailored to students' specific needs in areas where they need to improve. Teachers should model healthy communication behaviors for their pupils while teaching SEL communication strategies. This includes devoting full attention to kids while speaking instead of multitasking, which can be difficult for teachers with hectic schedules. When teachers can use technology in innovative ways to improve communication, it dramatically benefits kids' SEL communicative growth as well as their academic success.

### **School educators looking at the importance of SEL during the pandemic**

It is important to remember that many students are currently experiencing trauma due to the disruptions brought about by COVID-19, and that SEL negligence can further damage their emotional health (Stringer, 2020). It is an educator's job to focus not only on a student's academic work, but also on their well-being. This is much more difficult in virtual education as opposed to face-to-face interaction.

Since many natural social connections are lost in the online learning environment, it is critical for educators to prioritize SEL implementation in their curricula. When it comes to integrating SEL into remote teaching, educators must focus on two distinct goals. One is to track and measure how their kids learn in order to account for the fact that students learn in a variety of ways. Teachers should keep in mind that pupils understand issues in a variety of ways while planning lessons or classes. Second, teachers must develop more individualized instruction to best lift up their kids in order to expand learning and ensure that it reaches a wider number of students. For teachers who frequently have a big number of students, this may be a challenge. Teachers must establish a flexible learning environment in order to meet the demands of so many kids.

According to a survey over the past few years, 90% of educators appreciate SEL and would like to promote it in children's education. However, teachers struggle to implement SEL because SEL is not part of a curriculum that is so heavily focused on academic achievement. By continuing to ignore the SEL aspect of the classroom in the school curriculum, they cease to be in contact with students socially, emotionally, and mentally. This has a significant negative impact on the way we all interact socially as individuals and helps prevent students currently experiencing trauma from receiving help. However, SEL guarantees students the social and emotional support they need to survive these difficult and unfamiliar times associated with a pandemic.

During virtual learning, some educators have relied on alternatives to virtual implementations of SEL, for instance, allowing open discussions between students instead of the morning meetings and group circles that were held before the pandemic. Such discussions include a daily check-in, exchanges, and greetings, which help create a sense of security among students who struggle with the demands of online learning. Poetry writing has also been widely adopted by some educators so that students can begin to communicate their emotions and fears regarding COVID. Due to the nature of online education, teachers have usually

assigned their students less group work and group activities. In the past, such assignments had been important vehicles for promoting social awareness and relationship skills.

### **Training school teachers for SEL implementation during pandemic**

Many students have experienced social and emotional suffering related to isolation, uncertainty, food insecurity, digital divide, etc. as a result of the proliferation of COVID-19 in the United States, which teachers were just not prepared to deal with (Stringer, 2020). Training teachers about SEL is essential for the effective implementation of this sort of education (Frezza, 2018). Unfortunately, many teachers' training and evaluations place a much greater emphasis on academic accomplishment than on their pupils' social and emotional well-being even though social and emotional well-being has proved to have a heavy impact on most aspects of life, including academics. According to a group of teachers surveyed by the Education Week Research Center, less than 40% of them reported receiving dispute de-escalation training, and only 29% of the same group received mental health training in order to help their students (Schwartz, 2019). Dispute de-escalation training is important when dealing with children who lack developed relationship skills. General mental health training has proven to be more necessary during the pandemic.

Due to this lack of education, many instructors were unprepared to deal with the mental health issues that they encountered in the virtual classroom as a result of the shift of lifestyles amidst the pandemic. Some teachers have sought the assistance of school psychologists and other mental-health specialists to address this issue. Other teachers have taken it upon themselves to use different, innovative methods to oversee their students' social and emotional development.

### **Teacher's Adapting**

Going to school used to be a difficult experience for many students, but there was always a social connection between students and teachers who could offer help when it was needed. Educators today are unable to provide students with the same supportive ties. This adjustment has taken a toll on a large number of students' mental health. This pandemic has social and emotional consequences for everyone, not just students. Many teachers are experiencing emotional distress as a result of the high expectations placed on them to entirely overhaul their practice (Schroeder, 2020). All of this highlights the critical need for SEL teacher training and a fresh concept of what teacher preparation programs should entail.

One of the major issues that came with online education was the fact that students could not completely explain the challenging situation they were perhaps experiencing at home during in-person instruction. On video conferences, however, teachers are occasionally exposed to some students' turbulent environments and, as a result, are given additional insight into their own personal difficulties — abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, and so on. Remote learning has made the creation of relationships that would normally occur face-to-face to help students cope with these problems even more difficult. Unfortunately, this has had a negative impact on teachers' mental health, as they have realized that children no longer have the safe haven — school — where they could seek help prior to the pandemic. Some instructors also claim that, despite their social-emotional skills training, they were not taught about the more difficult or dangerous circumstances. These are common occurrences, and instructors should

be prepared with practical methods to employ in the classroom. Many instructors are on the verge of emotional breakdown as a result of their increased duties in teaching, preparing, advising, and research. Furthermore, virtual learning has contributed to a fall in instructors' mental health by exposing them to their students' personal environments.

### **Looking ahead**

Since the worldwide increase in COVID-19 cases, students and teachers have had to prepare for many new challenges. Education, which once captivated both teachers and students, is now negatively impacting mental health and productivity. Nevertheless, various changes can be made to ensure the prosperity of education for both teachers and students during these difficult times. Possible implementation solutions include certain aspects that are part of the basics of SEL learning.

One possible solution for a productive virtual learning environment is the development of a school (virtual) infrastructure that can support the SEL standard (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). This goal can be achieved by first forming an organization that is solely responsible for the long-term implementation of SEL. This commission would oversee each of SEL's core values and develop ways to ensure that each of them is disseminated in the classroom. Method choices include structuring activities, focusing and achieving goals, and assuming responsibility.

Another possible solution for a productive virtual learning environment could be to provide teachers with professional SEL training. Before implementing SEL in the classroom, it is essential that the teacher has knowledge of the subject area. All teachers need to receive appropriate training to better understand SEL and its potential benefits. These training sessions should be organized so that the teacher's time is respected. Many teachers are exhausted during this time of distance learning due to their tight schedules and heavy workloads, making it difficult to focus their time on external issues (Walker, 2020). Therefore, it may be necessary to give teachers a reasonable time frame to attend the SEL training course and advise each other as needed.

Finally, one of the solutions that may help create a positive learning environment for students is the use of daily check-in by teachers. During this pandemic, many students face a variety of challenges in their personal lives, and long-term isolation exposes them to anxiety and depression, as well as other problems such as abuse and substance use. Many students do not have the support they need to face these struggles, which only keeps them further away from school. Daily check-in at the beginning of the class can provide a comfortable atmosphere for students to express their pain and build relationships with their classmates as well as their teachers. This in turn helps reassure students that they are not alone during these difficult times. Teachers can also consider introducing lunchtime and mental health checkouts for students throughout the class and receive feedback to create a welcoming classroom environment for everyone.

### **Significance of SEL implementation in colleges, not just in schools:**

While SEL has demonstrated positive effects on the academic performance and overall well-being of K-12 students, it is still not part of the regular curriculum in most higher education

institutions (Hurtado, 2020). Many researchers are of the opinion that it is more valuable for institutions to devote resources to these learning mechanisms in early childhood, when students are more malleable and impressionable, than as adults (Hurtado, 2020). Thus, social and emotional learning is, in many cases, only offered as an intervention for students struggling in college and not as a part of the freshman experience for all students (Reinert, 2019).

However, this 'band aid' approach might not be adequate since students face a unique set of challenges once they start college and many suffer from mental health disorders (Hurtado, 2020) because of not being socially, mentally, and emotionally prepared to optimally adapt to new circumstances. During this period of their lives, many students live without their family for the first time, some might be forced to take on debt to fund their education, they might be entering romantic relationships, balancing academic responsibilities with part-time on-campus jobs and extra-curricular commitments, etc. Many first-generation students also suffer from freshman imposter syndrome, particularly in competitive STEM majors (Dolan, 2020). Moreover, the structured daily schedule and constant supervision by teachers and parents that high school students have is no longer a possibility in college (Wilcher, 2020). The inability to adjust to the demanding (and different) college environment can push frustrated college freshmen towards alcohol and drug abuse, violence, bullying, etc (Duzhyk, 2019). The uncertainties about health, academic opportunities, and the future in general have also exacerbated mental health issues during the pandemic. A survey conducted with 195 students at a large public university in the United States demonstrated that 71% of students experienced higher stress and anxiety levels due to the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). Honing the social and emotional skills of college students, more so during these stressful times, can lead to overall well-being, better academic performance, increased retention rates, and success in the job market or graduate school (Hurtado, 2020, Millette, 2020). According to a meta-analysis, it was discovered that SEL had led to a 10% decrease in the occurrences of emotional disorders as a result of academic pressure among students such as anxiety and depression (Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Student Benefits). Elmi found that integrating SEL in an introductory science course in a four-year university encouraged students to take interest in science, increased their stress resilience, and created a positive engaging atmosphere in the classroom (Elmi, 2020). Another study found that college freshmen exposed to the social and emotional learning curriculum had higher GPAs than other students across the four semesters following the completion of the course (Wang et al., 2012). SEL skills have also been shown to be important for job marketability, career success, and future career outcomes like promotions, salary, etc. (Hurtado, 2020). This is likely because the emotional stability, empathy, pleasant personality, collaborative mindset, problem-solving skills, and resilience that emanate as a result of SEL make individuals highly valuable to prospective employers and company leadership.

### **Challenges for Incorporating SEL in Higher Education and Possible Solutions:**

Just as with K-12 education, there are also many challenges involved with incorporating SEL within the college environment. Most students have to juggle weekly homework, quizzes, multiple midterms, finals, etc. for five to six courses each semester along with part-time jobs, work-study positions, summer internship applications, undergraduate research experience, etc.

(Gallagher & Stocker, 2018). If SEL only adds to the coursework burden and general busyness, it can make students feel more overwhelmed and add to their stress levels rather than being beneficial. Moreover, asking professors to completely overhaul their courses and design them with a central objective of SEL implementation can add to their already busy schedules teaching, leading research labs, grant-writing, mentoring, participating in departmental committees, etc. Further, from the standpoint of institutions, SEL requires many resources including institutional buy-ins and trained staff (Hurtado, 2020). It can often be difficult for the university leadership to justify these investments since there is no standardized approach yet for measuring SEL skills (Elmi, 2020).

Low effort and less time-consuming options to organically implement SEL in the college classroom include a classroom gratitude box placed in a freshman seminar class (where students could take 5 minutes at the beginning of class to write three things that they are grateful for that day, thereby drawing focus to the positive aspects of their life) or self-compassionate letter writing in an introductory English class where students write a letter to themselves from the perspective of a compassionate loved one (Biber, 2020). These measures might be particularly useful during the pandemic when it is easy to get anxious and depressed with the constant news of rising infection rates, daily death counts, vaccine controversies, travel restrictions, etc. Showing films during a couple of classes in a freshman seminar class and organizing a discussion around the movie scenes can help increase student vocabulary, manage emotions, develop conflict resolution skills, and get along better with peers from different backgrounds (Duzhyk, 2019). Another option is to have multiple courses with flipped classroom options which help students develop strong inter- and intra-personal skills and take ownership of their education. Additionally, instead of completely redesigning a class, one particular module in a class can be changed to integrate SEL skills, for example, a module in a freshman communication course aimed at enhancing job interview skills (Socas, 2017). For institutions aiming to integrate SEL-only components to their curriculum (i.e. not as a part of a regular course), a monthly webinar focusing on mindfulness, stress reduction, positive reflection, etc. can ease student anxiety during the uncertainty of the pandemic (Initiative on Social-Emotional Learning and Civic Engagement). These webinars can be supplemented with online moderated discussion boards where students can vent their frustrations and fears as well as support their peers with constructive advice. Once the pandemic is fully over, this webinar can be transitioned to a monthly evening seminar that freshmen are required to attend with small-group discussions facilitated by trained personnel. Similar to K-12 education, there is a need for professional SEL training for educators and departments at all universities that solely focus on SEL implementation (Frezza, 2018). Funds need to be raised for these initiatives, starting with SEL-specific philanthropic gifts and targeted federal planning grants. These funds will be easier to justify if academic researchers focus on developing standardized approaches for quantifying or qualitatively evaluating the effect of SEL skills on college student academic performance and personal well-being. However, we are not there yet. In the meantime, these innovative solutions, when applied consistently, can foster overall well-being and better success rates in college students.

## References:

- Biber, D. (2020). Social Emotional Learning for a College Classroom. *College Teaching*, 68(1). p. 49-52.
- Carnoy, M. & Garcia, E. (2017). *Five key trends in U.S. student performance: Progress by blacks and Hispanics, the takeoff of Asians, the stall of non-English speakers, the persistence of socioeconomic gaps, and the damaging effect of highly segregated schools*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/five-key-trends-in-u-s-student-performance-progress-by-blacks-and-hispanics-the-takeoff-of-asians-the-stall-of-non-english-speakers-the-persistence-of-socioeconomic-gaps-and-the-damaging-effect/>
- Dolan, E. W. (2020, January 11). First-generation university students are more likely to struggle with imposter syndrome. *Social Psychology*. <https://www.psypost.org/2020/01/first-generation-university-students-are-more-likely-to-struggle-with-imposter-syndrome-55207>
- Duzhyk, N. (2019). Films as a means of social and emotional learning in higher education. DOI <https://doi.org/10.32838/2663-6069/2019.2-1/15>.
- Elmi, C. (2020). Integrating social emotional learning strategies in higher education. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 10(3). p. 848-858.
- Frezza, Diana. (2018). Four Reasons Why Students-and Teachers-Need Sel Embedded into School All Day, Every Day. *EdSurge*. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-09-04-four-reasons-why-students-and-teachers-need-sel-embedded-into-school-all-day-every-day>.
- Gallagher, K. M., & Stocker, S. L. (2018). *A guide to incorporating social-emotional learning in the college classroom: Busting anxiety, boosting ability*. Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology. <https://teachpsych.org/resources/Documents/otrp/resources/Gallagher%20and%20Stocker%20SEL%20Manual%20-%20FULL.pdf>
- García, E., & Weiss, E. (2020, September 10). *COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy: Lessons from pre-pandemic research to inform relief, recovery, and rebuilding*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-education-performance-and-equity-in-the-united-states-what-can-we-learn-from-pre-pandemic-research-to-inform-relief-recovery-and-rebuilding/>.
- García, S. (n.d.). How SEL Helps You as a Teacher. Understood.org Retrieved July 21, 2021, from <https://www.understood.org/articles/en/how-sel-helps-you-as-a-teacher>
- Hurtado, I. L. (2020). *Social-emotional learning in higher education: Examining the relationship between social-emotional skills and students' academic success*. Dissertation submitted to University of Minnesota. [https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/216365/LopezHurtado\\_umn\\_0130E\\_21513.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/216365/LopezHurtado_umn_0130E_21513.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)



- Initiative on Social-Emotional Learning and Civic Engagement. (n.d.). Tufts.  
<https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/civic-studies/initiative-social-emotional-learning-and-civic-engagement>
- Millett, C.M. (2020). Perspectives on Social and Emotional Learning in Tertiary Education. *ETS Research Report Series, 2020*: 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12303>.
- Reinert, P. M. (2019). Social-emotional learning: a model for higher education. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning, Vol. 12 No. 2*, pp. 114-115.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-02-2019-0039>
- Schroeder, R. (2020, October 1). Wellness and Mental Health in 2020 Online Learning. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/wellness-and-mental-health-2020-online-learning>
- Schwartz, S. (2019, July 17). Teachers Support Social-Emotional Learning, But Say Students in Distress Strain Their Skills. Education Week.  
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/teachers-support-social-emotional-learning-but-say-students-in-distress-strain-their-skills/2019/07>
- Research Implications for the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Core Elements. (n.d.). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Student Benefits.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505369.pdf>
- Socas, J. (2017). Infusing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into the Community College Curriculum. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 41(12)*, p. 901-904.
- Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22(9)*, e21279. <https://doi.org/10.2196/21279>.
- Stringer, H. (2021). Zoom school's mental health toll on kids. Apa.org.  
<https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/online-learning-mental-health>
- Walker, T. (2020, April 15). Social-Emotional Learning Should Be Priority During COVID-19 Crisis. NEA. <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/social-emotional-learning-should-be-priority-during-covid-19>
- Wang, N., Wilhite, S. C., Wyatt, J., Young, T., Bloemker, G., & Wilhite, E. (2012). Impact of a college freshman social and emotional learning curriculum on student learning outcomes: An exploratory study. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 9(2)*, 8.
- Wilcher, T. (2020). Supporting the “Whole” Student: Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the Flipped Classroom. Center for Faculty Development News.  
[https://www.odu.edu/facultydevelopment/news/2020/2/supporting\\_the\\_whole](https://www.odu.edu/facultydevelopment/news/2020/2/supporting_the_whole)