NEPC Review: The Unexamined Rise of Therapeutic Education: How Social-Emotional Learning Extends K-12 Education's Reach Into Students' Lives and Expands Teachers' Roles (American Enterprise Institute, October 2021)

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Summary

The American Enterprise Institute report, *The Unexamined Rise of Therapeutic Education: How Social-Emotional Learning Extends K-12 Education's Reach into Students' Lives and Expands Teachers' Roles,* voices concerns regarding how the introduction of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches imposes ideas and techniques from psychology on classroom practices. The report contends that the rise in SEL has led schools to assume powers and responsibilities beyond their core mission of focusing on academic skills, and it claims that teachers are unprepared to take on "therapeutic" responsibilities. In reaching these conclusions, however, the report ignores the empirical evidence documenting the positive influence that SEL has on students' well-being, academic achievement, and sense of citizenship. It relies instead on a misrepresentation of SEL to promote misunderstanding and fear about it. The result is a one-sided discussion that does not make an evidence-based contribution and thus is not useful for informing policies.

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I. Introduction

Events of recent years, which have been fraught with pandemic-related transitions and polarized political tensions, have shed light on the need to focus on personal well-being, particularly in education. Public and charter school administrators who responded to a 2020 RAND Corporation survey, for example, reported that their greatest need for resources and professional development was to address students' social and mental health.[1] Educators everywhere have stepped up to the occasion—putting out fires, coping with unexpected situations, and engaging, informing, and bringing diverse stakeholders together to hold the pandemic at bay.

Long before the pandemic, however, educational thought leaders, researchers, and practitioners alike recognized that children's abilities to interact productively with others and manage their emotions affect how well they can learn what have been considered traditional academic subjects. They also recognized that children constantly learn social and emotional skills from peers and adults in schools, regardless of whether or not their schools are intentional about the nature of that learning. [2]

Over the last two and a half decades, however, new language has emerged for these ideas under the terminology "social and emotional learning" ("SEL"). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization established in 1994 "to promote high quality, evidence-based SEL,"[3] has driven the recent language and thinking about SEL as an explicit area of learning.

CASEL defines social and emotional learning as the the process through which all children and adults gain the abilities to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, solve problems effectively, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.[4] In other words, SEL addresses the social and emotional competencies that enable people to be good citizens and positive contributors to their lives and those around them, and to succeed in school. SEL curricula are largely designed to help educators intentionally and thoughtfully guide students' learning about these competencies, rather than let that learning take place haphazardly.

Research demonstrating the effects of these competencies on learning and on student well-being[5] has influenced policy. Eighteen states have begun to introduce K-12 SEL standards, and 26 states have been developing SEL implementation strategies for their school districts.[6] Districts are also using grants from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) and other district funds to attend to the social and emotional needs of faculty and student.[7] However, this increased attention and interest in SEL and the rapid implementation and scaling of SEL programs and interventions have raised some constructive critiques. Among them are concerns about ambiguity of what SEL is, overblown claims about the efficacy of certain programs, and an overhyped approach towards SEL as a solution to all school problems such as achievement gaps, low standardized test scores, racism, collapsing national values, violence, depression, anxiety, and more.[8]

The Unexamined Rise of Therapeutic Education: How Social-Emotional Learning Extends K-12 Education's Reach into Students' Lives and Expands Teachers' Roles,[9] written by Robert Pondiscio and released by the American Enterprise Institute, raises different concerns. It argues that the rise of SEL and its current centrality in education are the manifestation of an alarming new "therapeutic" vision for public education that may counter conservative views and values.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report begins by claiming that SEL is viewed as "unambiguously positive" in K-12 education and that there is cause for concern because "it represents a different vision for public education"[10] that has replaced the academic focus with a moral one. The report dismisses the potential relevance of any findings that show that SEL has positive educational impact.[11]

Rise of SEL

The report argues that the term SEL has been framed as part of education under the cover of jargon, which has concealed its true nature. It contends that even if SEL contributes to improved academic outcomes, it should not be included in education because redirecting attention away from academics and toward SEL intrudes on what is traditionally the work of families, faith, culture, and other institutions and relationships in American life.

When Education Becomes Therapy

The report relies on Ecclestone and Hayes' 2009 book to describe "therapeutic education" as overemphasizing students' emotional well-being, literacy, and competence, and as "aggressively inserting" popular psychological approaches into the classroom. It contends that this perspective, an extension of progressive education, is inappropriate for schools because it blurs ideas of human potential, resilience, and capacity for autonomy, and lowers expectations for student academic achievement. The report criticizes the affirmation of "therapeutic education" in social media and by policymakers, influential philanthropists, and schools. It points to restorative justice as a therapeutic practice linked to SEL now used as an alternative to the traditional discipline measures in schools.

Selling SEL

The report claims that SEL has been connected to academics and student success as selling points to gain traction, contending that even if one accepts the premise that SEL is actually linked to academics, it does not follow that SEL is an appropriate focus for schools.[12] The report claims that schools have become too concerned with students' emotional health and well-being, and are implementing initiatives that are too intrusive, sensitive, and personal, such that their legitimacy in public schools is questionable.

Trauma-Informed Education and Pathologizing Childhood

Finally, the report cautions against the rise of "safetyism" in the form of trauma-informed teaching practice.[13] It implies that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are being overmeasured and overdiagnosed in schools,[14] and then cautions against making clinical decisions about students that may stigmatize entire school populations, exacerbating inequities faced by working-class families.[15] It also warns applying the ACE framework to diagnose individuals would lead to labeling students as traumatized regardless of the specific nature of the trauma being experienced.

The report concludes with the argument that SEL has shifted the mission of education away from academic instruction and has expanded the roles of teachers beyond their training and expertise to include activities typically performed by psychologists, counselors, or social workers.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report's critique of SEL is conceptual and opinion-based rather than empirical. Its arguments against SEL are based on assumptions that: (a) SEL is politically favored by progressives vs. conservative families and teachers who have expressed their concerns; (b) SEL has overshadowed the focus on academics; (c) SEL has expanded and shifted the mission of the school to include imposed influence on the students' attitudes, values, and beliefs (d) SEL is

a form of therapy or treatment that uses diagnostic criteria such as ACEs that may stigmatize student populations; and (e) SEL has imposed "therapeutic education" on classroom practices and thus expanded the roles of teachers beyond their training and expertise.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Overall, the report misrepresents Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as "therapeutic education" and uses this straw man as a target for its criticism. It quotes conservative critical scholars who argue against the teaching of social and emotional skills in schools, while overlooking reports (also released by AEI) by other conservative authors articulating constructive criticism of SEL and its implementation.[16] More significantly, the report includes only a handful of evidence-based studies while omitting many others. It dismisses any value those studies might have by saying that not "every influence contributing to a 'broader vision of student success'" should be addressed in schools.[17]

The research uncited in the report indicates that well-implemented universal SEL programs/interventions are associated with positive academic and behavioral achievement.[18] For example, the Aspen Institute's[19] 2017 research drew evidence from at least 60 separate research studies on SEL that demonstrate its importance in helping students become engaged citizens. A meta-analysis study that reviewed 82 school-based SEL interventions involving 97,406 K-12 students showed positive youth development. They showed enhanced social and emotional skills, and overall well-being as a result of the SEL interventions.[20] In contrast to claims that "therapeutic education" and SEL could exacerbate inequities, evidence-based research demonstrates that all students can benefit from SEL development opportunities.

SEL skills can keep students from harm's way and make it less likely for them to develop behavior problems as a result of such risk factors as school failure, family poverty, peer pressure, and others.[21] Significantly, research on the neuroscience of brain development finds that cognitive, social, and emotional development are deeply integrated.[22]

The report claims that SEL is, for many, an "unwelcome intrusion into what is traditionally the work of families"[23] and claims that SEL has become central to schooling rather than playing a supportive role in students' education. These claims are not backed up by evidence-based research, but are, rather, speculations. Contradicting the report's claims, research finds that parents,[24] teachers, and school administrators[25] from various political persuasions—and perhaps most importantly, students[26]—respond positively to SEL. For example, a 2021 Fordham Institute report found that nearly all parents, regardless of their political persuasion, believed that schools play a role in providing SEL for children and wanted their children to acquire social and emotional skills.[27]

The long section on trauma-informed school practices mostly quotes concerns about how measurement of ACEs may be misused, thereby implying that such diagnostic criteria may stigmatize student populations. The argument here is misleading. SEL is not a form of therapy or treatment that uses ACEs for labeling students, and it is incorrect to portray it as such. SEL focuses on teaching all students knowledge, skills, and attitudes to facilitate success in

school and in life. It is a universal model appropriate for all students. It does not use any diagnostic criteria, and it is not focused on children who have therapeutic needs. The report misrepresents SEL as well as its goals.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

While it holds some valid and constructive points of criticism, the report frames SEL as part of a progressive agenda and therefore worrisome. Instead of informing readers by presenting research evidence regarding the experiences of teachers, administrators, and students, the report imposes a partisan agenda that highlights opinions rooted in ambiguous ideas not directly related to SEL and its effects on schooling. It presents a false dichotomy between cognitive/academic pursuits and social emotional learning, misleading readers into thinking that these domains are mutually exclusive.

The report falsely claims the existence of changes that are happening in education related to SEL such as: (a) the focus on the whole child becoming central to education rather than prioritizing academic knowledge and skills, (b) drifting away from classical and Christian education traditions, (c) increasing the sphere of influence of schooling and broadening the mission of schools, (d) pathologizing childhood through shallow integration of trauma-informed and therapeutic education and misuse of psychological measures such as ACEs, and (e) asking educators to perform tasks typically performed by mental health professionals, counselors, and psychologists—all of which are beyond their training and expertise. The arguments sincerely project these concerns, such that non-experts may follow the logic, be convinced of its points, and view SEL as part of the problem. However, the report fails to alert readers to the contested assumptions upon which its logic rests, particularly pertaining to the idea that education needs to return to its conservative roots.

Additionally, while the report builds on research that surfaces concerns about the overuse of ACEs, which may stigmatize certain underprivileged students, it excludes other bodies of research that show how SEL integration actually addresses issues of misrepresented students. Overall, the report makes appeals rooted in pathos and ethos, deliberately neglecting a rich body of literature, based on empirical evidence, that demonstrates the ways that SEL benefits students. Instead, it frames SEL as a political stance favored by progressives, thereby transforming it into a target to be attacked. The report overlooks the notion of SEL as an approach to education "that integrates learning so that students are best able to be successful"[28] and serve as active, engaged citizens in their communities.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report raises some important concerns. For example, schools implementing SEL programs or trauma-informed teaching should avoid programs or practices that might unfairly stigmatize students. They should also ensure that teachers have appropriate professional

development.[29] However, the report does not cite research evidence and is not based on empirical data. It misrepresents SEL and makes overblown claims about what SEL does (e.g., that it introduces therapeutic education and displaces academic curricula). Moreover, it highlights a political agenda instead of presenting both the evidence and valid concerns that have been raised about SEL. The latter approach would have made the report more useful to policymakers who may want to understand the promises as well as the pitfalls of SEL.[30]

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report rests on biased assumptions and innuendo instead of evidence, and creates a bogeyman instead of accurately presenting how SEL is being taught in schools. As such, it does not provide useful guidance for policymakers.

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