

# Transcript of LCIRT Research Roundup on Social Emotional Learning

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## Hello!

Hello everyone, this is Chris Wenz and I am a Research Scientist at LCIRT.

Today, I'm going to provide a *Research roundup* on social emotional learning. I've picked out five pieces of research on social emotional learning from the last two or so years and I'm going to briefly discuss what I think this work tells us about social emotional learning for adolescents. I'm not going to talk about these studies in great detail, BUT I will:

- provide a link to each
- highlight what I think are important take-aways from each study.

You can download the slides used to make this video and some additional resources at [www.landmark.edu/research-training/blog](http://www.landmark.edu/research-training/blog)

## For more.....

AND,

If you want to explore these and other resources on SEL in greater detail, we will be adding more materials in our Facebook Group. This video is meant to be a quick introduction to SEL and we won't talk much about specific classroom practices or interventions. But if there are topics you'd like to hear about or explore with us, or questions you'd like answered, please reach out to us. We'd love to hear from you.

## Agenda

So here's an overview of the topics I'll discuss in this video. I'll start with some recent meta-analyses that have looked at the body of evidence on the effectiveness of SEL programs in schools. Then I'll talk about a study of SEC in 400,000 school-age students and what it tells us about SEL needs of adolescents. Then we'll talk about a 2018 study that used some fancy latent variable methods to determine the extent to which CASEL's "wheel" can be measured in adolescents. Next I'll talk about a really interesting study of SEL profiles in high school Freshman that makes a compelling case for why we should measure SEL and differentiate how we teach SEC. Finally I'll quickly summarize two studies which discuss features of successful SEL and we'll wrap up with some key takeaways.

## Language

I'm going to be using a few acronyms and I want to be clear about what each means.

CASEL refers to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional learning. They are a non-profit that has done quite a bit of work designing, studying programs and implementing social emotional learning with their partner schools across the country. Their theoretical model of social emotional learning, what they call “the wheel”, is the most commonly used and I’ll be discussing it in some more detail in just a moment. I’ll also use the acronym SEL to refer to social emotional learning, and SEC to refer to social emotional competence. The way that I distinguish between those two terms is that SEL is active (so for example what we do in classrooms is provide opportunities for SEL). These opportunities (hopefully) lead to SEC, which we know is associated with all kinds of positive life outcomes.

## **CASEL competencies**

So this is what CASEL calls the “wheel” of SEL. The wheel theorizes SEL as 5 inter-related competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Note that these competencies are depicted within a series of circles, representing the various contexts in which SEL occurs. It’s a good visual reminder that that vertical alignment is crucial because the time spent in any one classroom is minuscule compared to the time students spend in other environments. Without a holistic approach to SEL, what occurs in the classroom is far less likely to have the desired impact on students.

The link on the bottom of this slide will take you to a detailed description of the competencies. There are a lot more resources on CASEL’s website as well: [casel.org](https://casel.org)

## **Facebook quote**

So, like any good researcher, I’m going to frame my discussion of recent studies with a quote that I found on facebook. I think it does a good job of summing up the big idea underlying the recent enthusiasm for SEL: leading a fulfilling life is as much about our emotions, behaviors and interactions with others then it is about our ability to master academics. I think part of what we are seeing in the adoption of SEL in schools is a response to our hyper-focus on test scores and some very scary research that shows anxiety and depression on the rise in adolescents and young adults. So I think the push for SEL as a core feature of education is an acknowledgement that we need schools that support the “whole child” not just a child’s academic needs.

## **Evidence of effectiveness**

There have been several recent meta-analyses that have looked across hundreds of

studies to understand whether SEL programs are effective. A recent article in the *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine provides a nice, brief summary of these meta-analyses and is well worth a read. Many individual studies have shown a relationship between SEL programming and both short and long term outcomes; each individual study has its own limitations: its participants, the measures used, the programs tested etc. What's great about meta-analyses is that they allow us to look across all of those studies in search of a general trend. If we can see effects of SEL programs across hundreds of studies (which include in this case many hundreds of thousands of students) we can feel a lot better about the claim that SEL programming has the short and long term outcomes listed on this slide.

The results of the meta-analyses discussed in the article are encouraging: school-based SEL programs lead to small, but consistent effects on a number of outcomes that we know are incredibly important: positive social behavior, emotional distress, attitudes about self and school, and conduct problems like bullying and violence against others. Perhaps most notably, SEL doesn't take away from academics: according to one of the meta-analyses, students who participate in SEL programming score on average 11 percentile points higher on standardized tests in math and reading.

These studies also tell us something very important: SEC is not only something we know matters for students' in the short and long term, it is also something that we know we can teach. In other words, because we know we can improve SEC in students based on what we do in classrooms, we know that what we do in classrooms can have a profound impact on our students.

## **SEC in adolescence**

Policy Analysis for California Education published a report on recent trends in SEL program implementation. CASEL has partnered with several large school districts in California and this report contains some really interesting findings. They have data on 400,000 students in grades K-12. This allowed the authors to look SEC at different ages using similar measures.

What they found is a little troubling: they could see steep declines in key SEL competencies from 4th grade to 12th grade, including self-efficacy, self-management and social awareness. What this tells me is that as we pull away from SEL as students age and focus more and more on academics, we leave their social and emotional needs unmet. We can't count on great SEL programs to "inoculate" students against the social and emotional challenges they will face in adolescence, especially given what we know about how vulnerable teenagers are in this critical period of development. Instead, SEL needs to

remain a valued part of education well beyond elementary school.

## Applying SEL models

A challenge to this goal, however is that we haven't learned enough about SEL programs for adolescents. For example, the CASEL "wheel" has been extensively tested with young children, but there has been less work on applying the model to adolescents. A study from this year, tested the CASEL model in a large sample of middle school students.

The authors were looking for several things about the five competencies:

First, they wanted to see if the five competencies were distinct from one another. This matters because if we believe, for example, self-awareness and self-management are two different things, and we want to be able to see growth in each of them, it's incredibly important that we can measure them separately. This kind of factor analysis has been done with measures of SEL in young children, but until this study there was not any work that had explicitly tested the the validity of the CASEL competencies in adolescents.

Second, they wanted to see if their measurements of the five competencies had predictive validity: in other words they wanted to know if a student's score on questions related to each of the competencies could tell them something meaningful about important academic and behavioral outcomes.

What they found is.....what they expected to find. This may feel like an underwhelming result, but I assure you: it's an important one. This study provides us with good evidence that we can measure the components of the CASEL model by asking adolescents good questions, and that the differences in how they respond to those questions mean something. Specifically, how adolescents respond is correlated with risky behavior, depression, delinquency, engagement with school and grades.

## Needs Profiles

Another really interesting study from 2018 also used self-report data to identify "profiles" of social emotional competence in high school freshman. Using a fancy method called latent profile analysis, the authors identified 5 distinct patterns in how the students responded to items on self-report measures of social emotional skills.

What this study shows quite clearly is that there are meaningful individual differences in SEC and that those differences have a direct relationship to academic performance and behavioral problems. Notably, the students who least valued social emotional skills had the highest incidence of problems in school. The authors, rightly say, that even though one of their profiles showed high social emotional skills in all the categories measured, schools still need to provide universal SEL programs; even those students who have high SEC will

need support in continuing to learn and grow. More importantly, the identification of these profiles means that schools should have systems in place that can 1) identify diverse needs and 2) provide programs and supports to meet those needs appropriately. In other words: a universal program is absolutely essential, but there will be students who need more or different supports to grow socially and emotionally.

These last two studies we have discussed also tell me something really important: there is some real value in using good self-report surveys to understand what students need socially and emotionally.

## **Program Features**

I also want to point you to two very interesting pieces on the features of successful SEL programs for adolescents. I can't get into all the details, of these but I absolutely recommend taking a look at these articles, particularly the Cervone and Cushman which is an executive summary of a report called "Learning by Heart: the power of SEL in secondary schools" It's a great read and focuses on 4 schools that are successfully implementing SEL.

There's a few themes that emerge from what I have read about good SEL programs for adolescents. First, there is a direct and positive relationship between explicitly teaching SEL skills and how students feel about school. In other words, the more SEL programming students receive, the better they feel about their school culture and their teachers. Other important things to note is that choice is a common element across successful SEL programs: this is particularly important in developing the competency "responsible decision making" – students need to have opportunities to make choices about what they learn, how they learn and how they're involved in school, but need to do so in a safe environment that encourages responsible risk-taking. I know it's shocking, but if we want teenagers to learn to make good decisions, we have to let them make decisions and learn from their successes and failures.

## **Takeaways**

I get that these studies on SEL and adolescents may seem a bit...unexciting. But, I assure you: they are important, especially given how little attention has been paid to older students in the existing research on SEL. The quality of these and other studies on SEL are a good indicator that the evidence has caught up with the enthusiasm for SEL.

What they provide to us as a whole is strong support a few key beliefs about SEL:

SEL programs produce positive effects in the short and long term. SEL programming can not end in elementary school or we risk seeing SEL decline in adolescence, a time where it

is critically important. We can measure SEL and those measurements can help us understand and account for the individual needs of our students. Finally, we have strong evidence that what we do in the classroom matters.

## **Questions? Comments?**

If you have questions or comments or just want to chat about SEL, you can leave a comment on our blog, our public facebook page, or join our facebook group. We'll also be providing some additional resources, including more videos, that dig deeper into SEL and specific practices to help students develop SEC.

## **Winter Institute**

Our upcoming Winter Institute for Educators is another opportunity to learn more about SEL. We'll have 3-day intensive workshops on autism, executive function, transition to college and math supports for neurodiverse learners as well as single sessions led by fabulous educators from across the country. You can save \$100 per person if you register as a group. We hope to see you there.

## **Thank you!**

Thanks for watching, Feel free to email me any questions, comments, or ideas for future videos.