

DON'T LEAVE FOR TOMORROW WHAT YOU CAN BUILD UP TODAY! USING EARLY SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO FOSTER HEALTHY, INCLUSIVE, AND SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES

FRANCISCO MACHADO¹
ANDREIA VALQUARESMA¹
HELENA AZEVEDO¹
MONICA SOARES^{1, 3, 4}
CARLA PEIXOTO^{1,5}
VERA COELHO^{1,2}

¹*University of Maia (Umaia), Portugal*

²*Center of Psychology At University of Porto*

³*Higher School of Education of Paula Frassinetti*

⁴*Center for Research in Psychology for Positive Development*

⁵*Center for Research and Innovation in Education (Ined),
School of Education, Porto Polytechnic, Portugal*

ABSTRACT

The chapter addresses the relevance of focusing on the building blocks of inclusive communities, and ultimately, societies. These include the development of the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure an adequate mindset that will allow for today's children and future adolescents and adults, to live their lives with well-being, mental health, and success, in communities that value diversity. Identifying needs and opportunities associated with key socioemotional learning (SEL) dimensions, such as social awareness, and skills such as empathy, is essential for any educational agent and/or professional that wants to contribute for significant changes towards more inclusive educational contexts. Recent research supports and underlines the importance of SEL in adequately preparing children, adolescents, and adults to better manage every dimension of their lives, from education to their careers,

including relationships. This chapter's objective is to provide a framework, underlining how early SEL can be used by educational agents and professionals to foster lifelong inclusion, learning and career development. Starting by presenting key theoretical aspects, we proceed to underline methodological solutions, and finish by presenting examples of best practices that can offer important insights for improving educational systems.

Keywords: SEL; skills; career; inclusion; education

INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) has gained significant attention in educational settings due to its potential to enhance students' emotional competence, interpersonal relationships, and academic performance (e.g., Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015; Mahoney et al., 2021). SEL models encompass a range of dimensions and skills designed to foster emotional awareness. Additionally, recent literature has underpinned that early childhood is a critical period for brain development and learning and that SEL provides the foundation for children to develop essential emotional and social skills that are fundamental to their future academic and personal success (e.g., Durlak et al., 2022; Coelho et al., 2023; Djamnezhad et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2020). It is now undeniable that socioemotional skills set the ground for positive social interactions, academic achievement, and overall well-being, not only during childhood but across adulthood (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023). Overall, investing in SEL since early childhood sets the stage for a brighter and more successful future for children as social competencies lay the foundation for future active citizenship behaviours, positive democratic values, and inclusive societies. By nurturing empathy, communication, critical thinking, and responsible decision-making, SEL interventions provide children with the tools they need to become engaged and empowered citizens who work towards building equitable, just, and inclusive communities. As these children grow into adults, their SEL experiences contribute to shaping democratic societies that value diversity, respect human rights, and prioritise the common good.

SEL can be described as an educational model that commonly includes several interconnected dimensions that contribute to a holistic approach in nurturing emotional and social development among individuals. This includes the process through which each individual «*apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions*» (CASEL, 2021). These dimensions typically include: (i) self-awareness, which refers to the developing the ability to recognize and

understand one's emotions, strengths, and weaknesses, thereby fostering empathy towards oneself; (ii) self-regulation, related to the ability of controlling both emotions and behaviours, which in turn enable individuals to respond empathetically to the emotional experiences of others; (iii) social-awareness, implying the individual's ability to perceive, understand, and be conscious of the social dynamics, needs, within their proximal contexts, and thus enhancing empathy towards others by fostering understanding of their emotions, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds; (iv) relationship skills, they imply building and maintaining positive relationships through effective communication, active listening, and empathy-driven interactions; and (v) responsible decision-making, which refers to the process of making choices and taking actions that are thoughtful, ethical, and considerate of the potential consequences and impact on oneself and others (Mahoney et al., 2021; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

In their framework, CASEL underlines the integration of SEL principles and practices at various levels, including students, teachers and educators, families, and the broader school environment aligned with the bioecological models of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and the dynamic development systems theory (Osher et al., 2020). In light of such broader developmental theories that underlie the malleability, plasticity, and individuality of learning and development process, as well as the role of relationships and contextual factors, the CASEL highlights the need for school settings to implement evidence-based SEL programs and curricula. It is pivotal that schools intentionally foster students' learning and development of social and emotional skills, ensuring that SEL is included in daily classroom activities and routines by creating positive and supportive learning environments. Additionally, the need for open communication between parents and teachers to collectively support the child's SEL is stressed. Furthermore, the model underlines the need of school-level action (e.g., Adi et al. 2007; Ștefan et al., 2022; Wigelsworth et al., 2022), and a community-level action to potentiate and extend SEL and its impact to the broader community.

Overall, SEL models are instrumental in fostering emotional and social competences among individuals, as well as in creating positive learning environments that contribute to inclusive societies and engaged communities. For that, an integrated approach in SEL must be taken, by incorporating multi level action to create a cohesive development of children's skills and extend positive SEL competencies benefits to the larger society, promoting positive, healthy, and inclusive outcomes for all stakeholders. As schools are in a privileged position for promoting development and learning, prioritising SEL in education can contribute to creating a more empathetic and compassionate society.

1. SEL SKILLS AS BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Savickas' Life Design model of career development underlines that 21st century workers must see themselves as life-long learners who can use increasingly sophisticated technology, embrace flexibility rather than stability, work on their employability and create their own opportunities within the work market (Savickas et al., 2009). Unlike their parents and grandparents, children born in the 21st century have to cope with a fast-moving, ever-changing and dynamic labour market, much more demanding in terms of their ability to adapt to constant change, and much less job security (Hirschi, 2018).

The new relationship between employers and employees that was introduced in the 21st century, greatly influenced by globalisation, and digital and information technologies, dictated that occupational prospects are far less definable, predictable, and linear, with plenty of difficult job transitions (Coetzee, 2019). These changes require workers to change their perspective and attitude about their careers and develop skills and competences quite different from prior generations. This new paradigm implies that career belongs to the individual and not the organisation (Duarte, 2004), meaning that individuals can, and should, develop a skill set that will allow them to be the most prepared to deal with career challenges, which tend to come earlier and earlier in our life course.

From this perspective, career development and interventions should assist individuals to reflect on their main characteristics (vocational strong points) as being relative to the context in which they live and not universal. The objective is to resolve problems, namely of adaptability and adjustment, that may arise as individuals build their lives, by matching their needs to those of the work contexts (Savickas et al., 2009).

Thus, the most efficient way to help students in building their careers, from pre-school to university and beyond, is to promote the awareness and use of processes and tools that will allow them to make choices that express their self-concepts. Habits of reflection on the self and the environment, receptivity to feedback, and the imagination of possible (professional) selves (Savickas et al., 2009), are excellent examples of key processes that are at the base of consistent career choices.

Moreover, if attention and awareness towards life contexts, social interaction and feedback, are key dimensions of career building, then it becomes fundamental for society in general and educational agents (namely parents, teachers, psychologists) to help individuals, from the earliest age possible, to develop the necessary skills to achieve proficiency, which is to say, SEL skills. Important skills, that have been thoroughly researched by CASEL, such as, for example, recognizing situational demands and opportunities and empathising with others (social awareness) play an important role in the way children, adolescents and adults are able to be

prepared for the challenges posed by their career choices and, very importantly, use resources and support available for them to cope with those challenges and be successful. Being able to communicate effectively, develop positive relationships, and resisting negative social pressure (relationship skills) are another example of crucial SEL skills, that, in this case, for example, will empower students and workers to develop and maintain social support networks, which they can and should rely on to gather knowledge, tools and resources to achieve their career/life goals.

Another cornerstone of the Life Design model is the concept of career adaptability, which pertains to a set of self-regulation competencies/resources, used by individuals to solve unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by developmental vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and work-related problems and/or conflicts. Self-regulation is defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and competencies that enable people to override impulses when faced with situations, such as academic failure, school-to-work transition, or job loss, among many others (Savickas, 2021), and act in a coherent, consistent, and adjusted way, considering their career/life path, avoiding bad career decisions, psychological maladjustment (e.g., stress and anxiety), among other potential negative outcomes (Lipschitz-Braziler & Gati, 2019). Research shows that self-regulatory capability for sustaining one's career is a precondition for career wellbeing and satisfaction (Van Dam et al., 2015). Thus, developing career adaptability provides people not only with the necessary tools to plan and execute a given career path, but also to cope with unexpected barriers to its progression, which can occur at any given time in our vocational development, avoiding career crises with potential impact for mental health, well-being and personal development.

Achieving a good level of career adaptability implies developing specific skills or resources, namely, concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas, 2021). This means that if we want to prepare our students to efficiently deal with their vocational/career development we should help them to be orientated towards the future and motivated to anticipate, and prepare for career moves (concern); be responsible, disciplined, organised and assertive as they build their careers (control); be open, inquisitive, curious, and exploratory about themselves, opportunities, and information, concerning their careers (curiosity); and be assured and persisting about making realistic career choices, as well as flexible, resilient and efficient when solving problems, moving towards achieving career goals (confidence) (Savickas, 2021). Optimally, every person should develop career adaptability from an early age, so as to be able to cope with unavoidable difficulties and problems that come, especially from transitions, whether they occur between preschool and elementary school, or between university and the work market.

Developing career adaptability, considering the skills implied in each key dimension (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) is intrinsically associated

with SEL, as many of the skills promoted by SEL programs and activities are the same. For example, motivation and proactivity, important to foster concern for my career (career adaptability), are internal processes included in the self-growth and self-management dimensions of SEL model, and often addressed, as such, in SEL promotion program and activities in educational contexts from different age groups. Also, having confidence (career adaptability) to make realistic career decisions and solve problems, implies developing resiliency, self-efficacy, self-assurance and persistence, all processes included, as well, in SEL's dimensions of self-growth and self-management. Self-development and identity formation are an integral part of the most well-accepted and research validated career development and career guidance models, like Donald Super's developmental model, as well as the most recent approaches, which are built upon the same theoretical and methodological pillars (Maree, 2020). In general, and considering what's been said, as well as the research data available, it's important to reinforce the implementation of school-based programs for SEL promotion, at every school level, as the implementation of such programs will clearly benefit student's development, namely in terms of vocation/career development. In this, school and educational psychologists can play an important part by applying some of the most recent good practices in career guidance, which focus on (early) promoting the (SEL) skills which are at the base of the dimensions of career adaptability, by implementing activities specially designed to that effect (Taber, 2019).

Nevertheless, it's important to note that in order to potentialize key SEL processes (e.g., self-efficacy) towards career development, these should be presented and framed as important skills for career building by educational agents. Especially because some of these processes are often overlooked as important tools for career construction and decision-making by students, educational agents and professionals. In this sense, intervention programs in educational contexts should be designed in a way as to integrate SEL and career development elements, thus potentializing both dimensions. This means that educational agents and professionals involved in such intervention programs should be proactive and act as advocates, increasing student's access to opportunities and resources, namely career related, as well as providing inclusive settings and contexts where students can feel safe and confident to explore potential career paths based on an evolving SEL skillset. Advocacy and inclusiveness are especially important in the case of career guidance of students with special needs, who are often discriminated against in this process and seen as having to settle with what society can provide them, more than being able to choose and proactively build their careers (Maree, 2020). The active role played by educational agents and professionals is fundamental for the efficacy of intervention efforts aimed to promote SEL and career development.

2. SEL AS THE BASIS FOR A LIFELONG EDUCATION THAT PROMOTES INCLUSION

Inclusion, equity, equality, cooperation, solidarity, responsibility and respect are principles that should govern social and educational policies and practices. Ensuring everyone's right to education means guaranteeing access, attendance, participation and success in quality educational processes and, consequently, in citizenship processes and cultures of coexistence.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as a leading agency in the field of education, helps countries to develop their education systems at different levels of schooling and activity, from childhood to old age, through secondary education, higher education and adulthood, in formal and non-formal contexts, for children, young people, adults and the elderly.

For United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022), inclusion translates into a continuous, systematic, intentional and deliberate effort to eliminate barriers to access to success in education, in a universal and complete logic, for everyone, regardless of the type of barriers (neurodiversity, access to school, stereotypes, prejudices, gender, race, disability, socioeconomic status, geography, etc). It therefore implies resizing inclusion action to a broader, multidimensional and intersectional view of diversity, i.e., promoting a structured and comprehensive view of diversity, equity and inclusion (Cerna et al., 2021).

So, lifelong learning, development and education involves considering the cognitive, personal, social and emotional skills that are fundamental to inclusion, diversity and equal opportunities, taking into account family, educational, community, social, cultural and professional contexts. The recognition of some basic SEL skills as essential for personal and professional fulfilment and satisfaction, quality of life and well-being, leads to the realisation of the need for a holistic and long-term educational approach that promotes inclusive responses and mediation at a personal, cognitive, emotional, social, educational and professional level for children, young people, adults and the elderly, with a real positive impact on human development, quality of life, social inclusion and the promotion of human rights and citizenship. In fact, the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), a document approved by the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, stresses that: *«Everyone has the right to inclusive and quality education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in the labour market.»* (p. 11).

Inclusion presupposes the right of each individual to (diverse) contexts that respond to their potential, expectations and needs within the framework of a common and plural educational, social or professional project that provides participa-

tion and a sense of belonging in effective conditions of equity, thus contributing decisively to greater levels of social cohesion. This means providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, as well as means of involvement, focusing on diversity, adequacy and the promotion of strategies to overcome challenges and ensure that each individual has equal access to opportunities, taking each and every one to the limit of their potential, to the detriment of any kind of discrimination.

All educational agents, from top and middle management to teachers and technicians and families and the community, are essential figures in education and social transformation. Welcoming and supporting all individuals, regardless of their abilities and requirements, are two indisputable ethical and professional commitments.

Inclusive education in childhood is fundamental, because at this stage of development the contributions to the formation of identity are varied and will act as a foundation for an adult who is welcoming, inclusive, cooperative and respectful of individual differences.

Thus, SEL also takes on added importance in terms of inclusion, especially in childhood, as SEL programs show lasting benefits beyond the immediate gains (Durlak et. al., 2011; Durlak et. al., 2022; Sklad et. al., 2012). Socio-emotional competencies are developed in various contexts (classroom, school, family and community) and imply that learning environments with shared goals and aligned practices are created in an articulated way, creating opportunities for social, emotional and educational growth.

Scientific evidence is consistent that SEL has a positive impact on children, adults and the wider community. In educational contexts, students involved in SEL programs showed an improvement in academic performance. In terms of mental health, students involved in SEL programs experienced fewer behavioural problems and decreased emotional distress, and the same trend was seen in social and emotional skills. SEL also improved students' perceptions of school climate, safety and sense of belonging. In other words, SEL helps foster safe and supportive environments that promote learning and well-being, where all students and adults feel respected, supported and involved, developing communication, problem-solving and cooperative work skills, as well as learning more tolerant behaviours. Research also shows that positive school climates promote academic performance, future educational success, mental well-being and positive relationships. Studies also show that students who have strong relationships with teachers and peers are more motivated and engaged in learning, more willing to deal with challenging material and persist with difficult learning tasks, and more likely to seek help in situations of conflict, violence, crisis, stress and discrimination (Cipriano et. al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Synder et al., 2011).

When it comes to the contexts in which people live in adulthood, SEL also shows an increased importance, particularly in professional contexts, where social and emotional skills are increasingly valued, with employers mentioning socio-emotional skills that they consider essential when recruiting, such as communication, self-awareness, the ability to work in a team, problem-solving and integrity. Several surveys show that professionals consider socio-emotional skills (sometimes referred to as «soft skills») to be very important in professional contexts. These skills are transferable as individuals' career plans change in an ever-changing world (LinkedIn Corporate Communications, 2019; Society for Human Resource Management, 2019; Wall Street Journal, 2016). Believing, then, that the school has as its imperatives and objectives both the academic training of students and their personal, relational and social training, the school context thus proves to be the ideal context to promote this change in the paradigm of inclusion and non-discrimination. Strategies need to be devised that promote aspects such as the responsible exercise of citizenship, learning to get involved in social and civic life, learning to engage in dialogue, respecting human rights, empathy, a positive attitude towards differences, the development of social skills and emotional control, self-knowledge and the development of self-esteem. These are essential skills that must be present for healthy coexistence in society (González-Perez & Pozo, 2007). Educational settings are key contexts for a sense of service and the promotion of eminently educational values (justice, non-violence, forgiveness, solidarity, participation and co-operation, honesty, loyalty, respect and recognition, empathy, hope, self-discipline, trust and responsibility, commitment, creativity, flexibility, serenity and patience), as opposed to counter-values, which are seen as disintegrating inclusion (hatred, fear, fundamentalism, lies, fraud, corruption and domination) (Costa, 2014). It is important for the educational community to promote proactive and positive strategies that allow for greater knowledge and mastery of the social reality in terms of citizenship, coexistence, violence and discrimination. This predisposition to collaborative intervention results in greater effectiveness in preventing problems of inclusion and greater concerted action to change the paradigm.

The willingness to listen and be listened to, and effectively try to introduce changes in behaviour in terms of integration, inclusion and non-discrimination, also involves the skill of empathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes, to understand them, to try to understand what is going on in their mind and to identify and understand their feelings. The perspective of empathy derives from a fundamental principle in interpersonal relationships: 'Everyone has their own motivations for acting'. It involves trying to understand how and why someone feels a certain way, but not from your own perspective, but by trying to think like that person, with their beliefs and values and generating the motivation and mobilisation needed to listen and be heard. This is the only way to create

and expand common areas of communication, because revealing the ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes, demonstrating that you understand their subjective experience and providing a reassuring feeling, also reveals involvement, connection and concern. It involves understanding what the other person is feeling and perhaps even being able to legitimise self-regulatory behaviours that go beyond what is socially expected. This attitude will not reinforce negative feelings, something that a coercive or punitive measure would do. Empathy opens up a space for dialog, a space that is fundamental to solving problems in any context. This work naturally implies a greater investment in the relationship with the other, an investment that involves, above all, adopting an emotional perspective devoid of value judgments, to the detriment of a purely cognitive perspective. In this way, it is possible for individuals to effectively learn and establish more sustained relationships and transfer this learning to other life contexts (Soares, 2019). The learning naturally translates into a significant improvement in the paradigms of coexistence, whether in educational, family or professional contexts, because in the long term, these approaches contribute to individuals taking greater responsibility for solving their own problems and feeling more motivated to share feelings (Soares, 2017).

It is suggested that educational and social leaders resolve to create organisational cultures that foster an inclusive paradigm, in the sense of valuing difference, in a practice that involves and reactivates communication, thus managing to heal and overcome discriminatory relationships. Any professional with educational ambitions, be they a psychologist, teacher, sociologist, psycho-pedagogue, socio-educational mediator, principal or social worker, can develop projects in this field and bring together the specific potential of their area of expertise with that of inclusion, thus contributing to the promotion of appropriate climates for effective educational success and well-being. There are mechanisms that make it possible to think of a more inclusive education and it is necessary to implement them (Soares, 2019):

1. investing in an organisational and/or school culture with a strong social and educational commitment;
2. to build and foster relationships based on peace;
3. promoting, defending and nurturing values such as justice, freedom, cooperation, respect, solidarity, commitment, autonomy, dialogue and involvement to the detriment of discrimination, intolerance, violence, indifference and conformism;
4. spread these principles regularly among all those involved in the educational and/or organisational community;
5. investing in group work and collective projects;
6. promote SEL programs suitable for various and different agents of the educational and/or organisational community;

7. creating equality and equity and creating cooperative, democratic and positive climates in the context of action;
8. encourage reflection, the exchange of arguments, points of view and opinions in a logic of growth, learning, development and empathy;
9. to use techniques for reflection and moral development, debating experiences, clarifying values, discussing dilemmas and alternative ways of resolving individual, intergroup and intragroup differences;
10. provide situations that encourage communication and coexistence, in a logic of empowerment, recognition and legitimization of the parties.

In short, we need answers that are linked to improving overall relationships and coexistence between everyone. We need to train and aim to acquire strategies that can be easily transposed to the various contexts of the individual's life. In this way, more positive and respectful relationships are created, and an educational space is created that fosters healthy, cooperative and inclusive relationships. Inclusive education is responsible for creating the conditions to promote the learning of strategies for autonomy, development and growth in ways of thinking, knowing, being and acting in every kind, resulting in a more inclusive and equitable contexts, where diversity is welcomed and valued.

3. ADVOCACY AS A CATALYST OF SEL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Complex societal issues of the 21st-century impact children and adolescents' academic success and positive social-emotional development (Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). Specific concerns related to inequity and social injustice within school settings, based on race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability status, sexual orientation, cultural background, and immigration status have a negative effect on students' academic performance and social and emotional growth (Storms, 2013; Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). These inequities challenge the school setting to «the need for professionals to make a more concerted effort at addressing environmental factors that serve as barriers to academic, career, and personal/social development» (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009, p. 269).

In this sense, the literature highlights the role of educational professionals, such as school psychologists, school counsellors, principals, and teachers, as social agents who can contribute to eliminating the achievement gap, increasing academic expectations, and becoming more proactive in order to build a safe and inclusive environment to all students regardless their condition or social standing in society (e.g., Ratts et al., 2007; Storms, 2013; Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). In fact, professionals can take on the role of educational leaders working as social justice advocates, help to advance diversity and human rights, increase access to oppor-

tunities and resources, and improve educational outcomes for all students (Ratts et al., 2007). Therefore, advocacy is one way by which social justice and inclusion are attained (Crawford et al., 2014; Lowery et al., 2019). Advocacy encompasses attitudes and actions of educational professionals at an individual (micro), institutional and community (meso) and societal/political (macro) levels, to seek positive change, and influence inclusive decision-making (Lowery et al., 2019; Presseau et al., 2019).

Shields et al. (2018) stated that advocacy «would involve communicating how old knowledge frames perpetuate inequity and working toward equitable reconstruction with a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice.» (p. 8). Hence, advocacy is a key skill in the 21st century to address equity for all students and is a lifelong pursuit (Grapin et al., 2021). These competences seem particularly relevant for marginalised students due to individual, social, and learning factors at risk for social, emotional, and behavioural challenges (Ballard et al., 2021; Ratts et al., 2007).

Using advocacy practices to attend to student concerns can empower students, and it can transform educational professionals' practices, roles, and responsibilities (Ratts et al., 2007; Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020) highlights that creating equitable school environments requires that professionals' practices «reflect understanding and respect for human diversity and promote effective services, advocacy, and social justice for all students, families, and schools» (p. 2). It involves the three levels of the advocacy competencies to promote all students' academic, career, and personal/social needs (Ratts et al., 2007). At the individual level, advocacy practices are focused on the domains of student empowerment and student advocacy. Empowering students encompasses increasing students' self-advocacy by working with them, in the classrooms, in small groups, or individually, to develop skills for students to speak up for themselves about their rights and take their own actions (Ballard et al., 2021; Ratts et al., 2007). Professionals can also advocate on behalf of students contributing to others' awareness and reflection to build a supportive environment (Ballard et al., 2021). The school/community level of advocacy involves collaboration practices and systems advocacy to address and change environmental barriers (Ratts et al., 2007). When professionals involve students in collaboration practices, it can contribute to their empowerment and comfort to advocate for their needs and their peers' needs (Ballard et al., 2021). Moreover, advocating for students implies embracing a systemic change beyond helping individuals. The concern with well-being and positive development of children drives educational professionals to address and eliminate barriers beyond individual aspects, which implies an analysis of environmental factors and systemic intervention to be effective. The societal/political level comprises public information and social/political

advocacy domains. It involves informing the general public about issues related to inequities and social justice and how professionals can influence public policy (Ratts et al., 2007).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) play a significant role in social justice advocacy by empowering children, adolescents, and adults with skills to address complex societal issues. For instance, competences, such as empathy and perspective-taking, are crucial in inclusive contexts as they allow advocates to better grasp the experiences and challenges faced by marginalised groups. These competences may represent the core skills for respecting and welcoming diversity in several contexts, which will, in turn, facilitate a smooth integration in any educational/work context where individuals have to adjust to colleagues from very different social and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, self-awareness competences provide the recognition and self-reflection about thoughts, feelings, and biases that could be related to discriminatory behaviours. Creating inclusive and respectful environments also involves using effective communication, embracing inclusive language, encouraging others to do the same, and avoiding language that does not respect diversity (American Psychological Association, 2021). While SEL contributes to social justice advocacy by ensuring pivotal competences to address inequalities and enhancing attitudes and practices toward positive changes and a more just and inclusive society, using social justice advocacy practices also provides the development of social and emotional competences, contributing, for instance, to enhance empathy towards others experience and identities and awareness of other's needs.

Therefore, empowering students to embrace inclusive attitudes requires developing social and emotional skills and involvement in advocacy actions. Educational professionals have a significant role in supporting students and engaging in systemic interventions for creating a school culture and climate aligned with SEL and inclusive principles. Designing projects and both school and classroom activities intentionally prepared to promote SEL and advocacy attitudes can provide an opportunity for effective development. Nevertheless, these practices require professional development opportunities to enhance their own SEL and advocacy skills in order to be well-prepared to facilitate SEL and social justice advocacy actions, beyond scientific and pedagogic preparation.

The impact these professionals, who are also role models and significant figures, have on their students, can also make a difference in the way these students make career choices and cope with the barriers that they will inevitably face. As social justice advocates, educational professionals (e.g., school psychologists, teachers) can potentially impact, directly and indirectly, their students' career development and choices. In a more direct way, as advocates for social justice, educational professionals can support the inclusion of all students, especially of those at risk of exclusion and discrimination in school contexts, providing or helping to provide the

necessary support (e.g., economical, educational, psychological, material) for them to achieve their learning goals and academic success, necessary for career building. Additionally, they can empower students to recognize and overcome individual and contextual barriers that limit their choices and career development. Advocating for students' rights and interests and adopting collaboration practices between educational professionals and stakeholders can also contribute to a more inclusive career. In the same sense, indirectly, educational professionals, as role models, can help their students to develop an inclusive and empathic mindset, attitudes and behaviours, which will make them more able to adjust and adapt to a wide variety of academic and work environments, with regard for their implicit diversity. One way or the other, having educational agents and professionals acting as advocates for key values like social justice, inclusion, equity and diversity, can greatly help students to build a sound internal structure and skillset, based upon which they can plan and execute their career projects.

4. CONNECTING TO EDUCATION: CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION TO EDUCATION

Throughout this chapter, we have been discussing how SEL can play a unique role in creating a more inclusive society and how diverse educational settings and educational agents can decisively contribute to empowering individuals and communities to actively construct a more equitable future. From a lifespan perspective, anchoring educational practices in SEL principles can have a significant impact on overall psychological development (CASEL, 2021), given that they are entwined with dimensions such as well-being, perspective-taking, social awareness, and self-regulation, amongst others. Moreover, in a world pervaded by uncertainty, having the ability to deal with the unexpected in a positive and adequate way can shape one's sense of self-efficacy and define self-regulation mechanisms that indelibly structure positive and meaningful developmental trajectories. Discussing SEL implies considering what it means to think, feel, and act in context (Elias, 2019). Accordingly, SEL has the potential to engage individuals in a continuous meaning-making process in which the self, the other, and the World come together to construct a complex, dynamic, and inclusive understanding of human essence and development.

The framework outlined in this chapter emphasises how SEL can be used in a variety of educational contexts, and at every stage of development. Indeed, it can be a tool to intentionally foster lifelong inclusion, learning, and career development, to name a few. It can apply to formal learning contexts (e.g., schools), as well as non-formal (e.g., community groups and organisations) and informal (e.g., friends and family).

In the first section, we laid bare the theoretical underpinnings of SEL that can help define SEL programs and curricula which can be integrated into regular classroom activities and routines to create positive and supportive learning environments. Some specific strategies were presented, such as ensuring that educational agents communicate about SEL in an open and encouraging manner and setting up the right conditions for effective articulation between school and community-level interventions, whose effects extend beyond the boundaries of the school to the larger community.

Another key developmental sphere where SEL can have a significant impact is career development. Preparing students (and individuals) to deal with uncertainty and creatively overcome unforeseen obstacles has emerged as a pivotal competency in light of the ongoing and demanding challenges posed by the modern labour market. To develop such competency, it is essential to act systemically and to intentionally foster proficiency in the development of positive relationships, social and self-awareness, effective communication, and responsible decision-making, all core SEL skills (CASEL, 2021). Besides, from a developmental viewpoint, cultivating the ability to critically reflect on one's experiences and expectations contributes to a more efficient analysis of situational demands and opportunities, which in turn results in an active construction of contextual and self-knowledge (improving self-regulation), unfolding developmental possibilities that would remain inaccessible otherwise. The development of goal-directed behaviours can also help define (and achieve) personal development goals, which contributes to constructing and sustaining an invaluable sense of being able to steer life's course by means of personal action (Bandura, 2001).

In fact, the fundamental goal of transformative SEL practices like advocacy is to encourage agentic behaviour. A more equitable, just, and inclusive society can be achieved through effective and long-lasting societal change brought about by advocacy practices that empower people and communities. By endowing individuals with empathy and perspective-taking, these practices contribute to constructing a society where the relationship between oneself, the other and the World is nurtured, promoting a continuous balance of individual and collective needs. In this light, advocacy can also spur societal change, namely through the active involvement of educational agents in the inclusion of marginalised groups in the construction of tomorrow's society.

Altogether, the different sections of this chapter emphasise the importance of intentionally encouraging the development of appropriate interpersonal skills throughout the lifespan in plentiful life contexts when aiming to help individuals and communities reach their maximum potential. However, such a complex and challenging goal is not always easy to accomplish, particularly when considering education and the idiosyncrasies of learning contexts, highly permeable to con-

textual diversity, as well as to cultural, social, and political demands. Therefore, discussing some best practice examples can offer crucial insights for creating and implementing genuinely transformative SEL programs (in schools, organisations, and communities around the world).

Best Practices

Transformative SEL is embedded in the pursuit of equity, social justice, and cultural relevance (Jagers et al., 2019), seeking to promote embedded and contextual knowledge. Nevertheless, this can be a particularly difficult task when taking into account the variety of realities that exist in educational settings. Furthermore, if we consider how one-size-fits-all approaches rarely succeed in achieving favourable and long-lasting effects, the significance of anchoring SEL in context-based practices is further underscored (Bryk et al., 2015). This allows for designing and implementing interventions that provide tailored starting points and precise inputs, ensuring that the necessary adjustments are made to ensure the participants' progress is as good as possible. Hence, it is important to use data to inform decision-making processes related to the implementation of SEL, given that «*effective SEL instruction draws on theory and research and is carefully planned*» (Elias, 2019, p. 235). In fact, because SEL is a dynamic process, any interventions based on its principles must be open to continuous assessment and to making changes whenever and wherever they are required (Hanover Research, 2019). Furthermore, context-based practices increase the likelihood that SEL strategies and skills will be transferred to daily life contexts in real-time (Education Analytics, 2019), having an impact outside of the classroom and becoming inseparably woven into the social and cultural fabric of the community.

Therefore, the best practice would be to balance interventions that are evidence-based and context-based. Although it can be challenging to find evidence-based interventions that have been used and studied in contexts similar to one's own due to the unique nature of each educational setting, starting with «best practice» and then designing and evaluating an intervention that is specifically tailored to each educational context can maximise efficiency and impact.

However, it is crucial that SEL interventions take into account not only students but also other educational agents (like guardians and families) in order to guarantee the community's active involvement. To achieve this, schools must make an investment in boosting student achievement by addressing the emotional and social aspects of learning through engaging and interactive methods. At this level, art can be a unique vehicle to encourage social and emotional expression while also supporting general wellbeing in people of all ages. These actions can be supplemented by parent discussion groups or workshops where SEL topics can be discussed according to their needs (such as school advocacy, self-care, or co-regulation at home). Therefore, actively developing school-family-community partnerships

is a best practice that can support a systemic, well-coordinated, and successful approach to SEL.

At the same time, SEL strategies and programs should be developed using a developmental lens in order to be flexible enough to accommodate different developmental stages and provide time for implementation and assessment (Jones et al., 2018). Rushing interventions can be detrimental given the influence SEL programs and practices can have on a person's psychological development. The process of internalising experiences (Vygotsky, 1978), which is essential for the worldmaking processes (Goodman, 1978) that bring about meaningful and profound developmental change, depends heavily on time. In this sense, encouraging self-reflection in all SEL participants and educational agents is a best practice that can be used in any learning environment and has a direct impact on learners' capacity to critically evaluate their personal experiences, take advantage of opportunities, and deal with a variety of challenges.

Nevertheless, institutional and organisational involvement is necessary for such best practices to be successful. The organisational culture must also be rooted in SEL principles for this to happen. A clear message regarding the importance and inclusion of every educational agent is required, along with adequate staff support and training. Exchanges between school personnel interested in SEL programming should also be encouraged. In other educational settings, measures such as implementing mental health services for all staff and integrating SEL topics (e.g., empathy, mindfulness, burnout, ...) into the organisational discourse and priorities, can prove to be effective.

Last but not least, intentionality is crucial. An intentional action is required to foster a significant (and thus long-lasting) change within psychological development structures; otherwise, the ability to internalise and (re)construct experiences is put at risk. Enacting this intentionality in educators will, however, require fundamental changes in the preparation of educators as well as educational researchers. To ensure that these professionals receive better SEL training and that SEL principles are widespread in national educational communities, policymakers play a decisive role.

In a nutshell, learning is a multidimensional process that encompasses social and emotional dimensions, as well as cognitive and physical. In this day and age, discussing education, pedagogy, learning processes, curriculum, academic achievement and the climate and culture of contemporary schools is inextricably linked to discussing socio-emotional competencies. In a world where civic life and citizenship appear to become increasingly complex, SEL competencies emerge as a powerful tool to countervail nefarious forces and be able to construct a meaningful sense of self and of positive purpose. Because of this, SEL is still an invaluable

framework for illuminating the debate revolving around the challenges of contemporary education.

REFERENCES

- ADI, Y., KILLORAN, A., JANMOHAMED, K., & STEWART-BROWN, S. (2007). Systematic review of the effectiveness of interventions to promote mental wellbeing in children in primary education. Report 1: Universal approaches: non-violence related outcomes. Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects (DARE): *Quality-assessed Reviews*.
- AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION. (2021). Inclusive language guidelines. <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines.pdf>
- BALLARD, S., BENDER, S. L., DANIELS, B., & PALACIOS, A. M. (2021). School psychology leadership for marginalized students. In L. Kilanowski & K. Augustyniak (Eds.), *Principles of leadership in school psychology* (pp. 103–124). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84063-1_7
- BANDURA, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>
- BRONFENBRENNER, U., & MORRIS, P. (2006). *The Bioecological Model of Human Development*. In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (pp. 793–828). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- BRYK, A. S., GOMEZ, L. M., GRUNOW, A., & LEMAHIEU, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.
- CERNA, L., MEZZANOTTE, C., RUTIGLIANO, A., BRUSSINO, O., SANTIAGO, P., BORGONOV, F., & GUTHRIE, C. (2021). *Promoting inclusive education for diverse societies: A conceptual framework*. OECD Education Working Papers 260, OECD Publishing.
- CIPRIANO, C., NAPLES, L. H., ZIEHER, A., DURLAK, J., EVELEIGH, A., FUNERO, M., ... & CHOW, J. (2023). The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968>
- COELHO, V., PEIXOTO, C., AZEVEDO, H., MACHADO, F., SOARES, M., & ESPAIN, A. (2023). Effects of a Portuguese social-emotional learning program on elementary school students competencies. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1195746>
- COLLABORATIVE FOR ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING [CASEL]. (2021). <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>
- COSTA, E. P. (2014). De la diversidad praxeológica a la unidad identitaria de los mediadores. *La Trama*, 41, 1–9.
- CRAWFORD, E. R., & ARNOLD, N. W., & BROWN, A. (2014). From preservice leaders to advocacy leaders: Exploring intersections in standards for advocacy in educational leadership and school counseling. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 17(4), 481–502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.931467>
- DJAMNEZHAD, D., KOLTICHEVA, N., DIZDAREVIC, A., MUJEZINOVIC, A., PEIXOTO, C., COELHO, V., ... & HOFVANDER, B. (2021). Social and emotional learning in pre-

- school settings: A systematic map of systematic reviews. *Frontiers in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.691670>
- DUARTE, M. E. (2004). O indivíduo e a organização: Perspectivas de desenvolvimento. *Psychologica*, 2004, 549–557.
- DURLAK, J. A., MAHONEY, J. L., & BOYLE, A. E. (2022). What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents: A review of meta-analyses and directions for future research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 148(11-12), 765–782. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000383>
- DURLAK, J. A., WEISSBERG, R. P., DYMNIKI, A. B., TAYLOR, R. D., AND SCHELLINGER, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development* 82, 405–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- EDUCATION ANALYTICS. (2019). *Measuring Social Emotional Learning Best Practices and Lessons Learned for SEL Assessment*. Education Analytics Inc.
- ELIAS, M. J. (2019). What if the doors of every schoolhouse opened to social-emotional learning tomorrow: Reflections on how to feasibly scale up high-quality SEL., *Educational Psychologist*, 54, 233–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1636655>
- GONZÁLEZ-PÉREZ, J. & POZO, M. J. C. (2007). *Educar para a não violência: perspectivas e estratégias de intervenção*. Mem Martins: K Editora.
- GOODMAN, N. (1978). *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett Publishing Company.
- GRAPIN, S. L., CUNNINGHAM, D. J., & SITAL, M. (2021). Preparing social justice advocates through undergraduate service learning in school psychology, *School Psychology Review*, 478–492. <http://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1878389>
- HANOVER RESEARCH (2019). *Best Practices in Socioemotional Learning*. Hanover Research
- HIRSCHI, A. (2018). The fourth industrial revolution: Issues and implications for career research and practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 66, 192–204. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12142>.
- JAGERS, R. J., RIVAS-DRAKE, D., & WILLIAMS, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 162–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032>
- JONES, D. E., GREENBERG, M., AND CROWLEY, M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health* 105:11, 2283–2290. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302630>
- JONES, S., BAILEY, R., BRUSH, K. & KAHN, J. (2018). *Preparing for Effective SEL Implementation*. Harvard Graduate School of Education
- LINKEDIN CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS (2019). *LinkedIn Releases 2019 Global Talent Trends Report*. <https://news.linkedin.com/2019/January/linkedin-releases-2019-global-talent-trends-report>
- LIPSHITS-BRAZILIER, Y., & GATI, I. (2019). Facilitating career transitions with coping and decision-making approaches. *Handbook of innovative career counselling*, In *Handbook of Innovative Career Counselling*, J. G. Maree (Ed.), Springer, 2019, pp 139–156. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22799-9_9

- LOWERY, K., MAYES, R. D., QUICK, M. M., BOYLAND, L. G., GEESA, R. L., & KIM, J. (2019). Principal and counselor collaboration for social justice advocacy: A standards alignment. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Special Issue #2 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice*, 3(2).
- MAHONEY, J. L., WEISSBERG, R. P., GREENBERG, M. T., DUSENBURY, L., JAGERS, R. J., NIEMI, K., ... & YODER, N. (2021). Systemic social and emotional learning: Promoting educational success for all preschool to high school students. *American Psychologist*, 76(7), 1128. 783-800. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000701>
- NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS (2020). *The professional standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*. NASP.
- OSHER, D., CANTOR, P., BERG, J., STEYER, L., & ROSE, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650>
- PRESSEAU, C., LUU, L. P., INMAN, A. G., & DEBLAERE, C. (2019). Trainee social justice advocacy: Investigating the roles of training factors and multicultural competence. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 32(2), 260-274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2018.1476837>
- RATTS, M. J., & HUTCHINS, A. M. (2009). ACA advocacy competencies: Social justice advocacy at the client/student level. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 87, 269–275. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2009.tb00106.x>
- RATTS, M., DEKRUUF, L., & CHEN-HAYES, S. F. (2007). The ACA advocacy competencies: A social justice advocacy framework for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 11, 90–97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732788>
- SAVICKAS, M. L., NOTA, L., ROSSIER, J., DAUWALDER, J. P., DUARTE, M. E., GUICHARD, J., ... & VAN VIANEN, A. E. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 75(3), 239-250. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004>
- SAVICKAS, M. (2021). *Career Adaptability*. USA: 48HrBooks.
- SHIELDS, C. M., DOLLARHIDE, C. T., & YOUNG, A. A. (2018). Transformative leadership in school counseling: An emerging paradigm for equity and excellence. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1b), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X1877358>
- SKLAD, M., DIEKSTRA, R., RITTER, M. D., BEN, J., & GRAVESTIJN, C. (2012). Effectiveness of schoolbased universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 892–909. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21641>
- SNYDER, J. S., SOUMIER, A., BREWER, M., PICKEL, J., & CAMERON, H. A. (2011). Adult hippocampal neurogenesis buffers stress responses and depressive behaviour. *Nature*, 476(7361), 458–461. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature10287>
- SOARES, M. (2017). *Conflitualidade e violência na escola: Um diagnóstico concelhio e a avaliação do impacto de uma proposta de intervenção*. (Tese de doutoramento não publicada). Covilhã: Universidade da Beira Interior. https://ubibliorum.ubi.pt/bitstream/10400.6/4462/1/PhD_M%C3%B3nicaNogueiraSoares_2017.pdf
- SOARES, M. (2019). Aula de Convivência – Uma Resposta Integrada na Cultura de Mediação (352-368). In A. Nunes; D. F. Jorge; J. R. Monteiro; J. C. Morais; L. T. Dias, L.

- Miranda, M. Ricou & R. Trindade (Orgs.), *Atas do 3º Congresso Internacional promovido pela Revista de Psicologia, Educação e Cultura: «o local e o mundo: sinergias na era da informação»*. Vila Nova de Gaia: ISPAGAYA. ISBN: 978-972-8182-18-2. <https://comum.rcaap.pt/bitstream/10400.26/28281/1/Atas%20do%203o%20Congresso%20PEC.pdf>
- SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT. (2019). *Employers Say Students Aren't Learning Soft Skills in College*. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/employers-say-students-arent-learning-soft-skills-in-college.aspx>
- ȘTEFAN, C. A., DĂNILĂ, I., AND CRISTESCU, D. (2022). Classroom-wide school interventions for preschoolers' social-emotional learning: A systematic review of evidence-based programs. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(4), 2971–3010. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09680>
- STORMS, S. B. (2013). Preparing teachers for social justice advocacy: Am I walking my talk? *Multicultural Education*, 20(2), 33-39.
- TAYLOR, R. D., OBERLE, E., DURLAK, J. A., AND WEISSBERG, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88, 1156–1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
- THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2016). *Employers Find 'Soft Skills' Like Critical Thinking in Short Supply*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/employers-find-soft-skills-like-critical-thinking-in-short-supply-1472549400>
- UNESCO (2022). *Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments*. Disponível em <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707.locale=en>
- WEISSBERG, R. P., & CASCARINO, J. (2013). Academic learning+ social-emotional learning= national priority. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(2), 8-13.
- WIGELSWORTH, M., VERITY, L., MASON, C., QUALTER, P., AND HUMPHREY, N. (2022). Social and emotional learning in primary schools: A review of the current state of evidence. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 92(3), 898–924. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.124>
- WILLIAMS, J. M., & GREENLEAF, A. T. (2012). Ecological psychology: Potential contributions to social justice and advocacy in school settings. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 22, 141-157. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2011.649653>