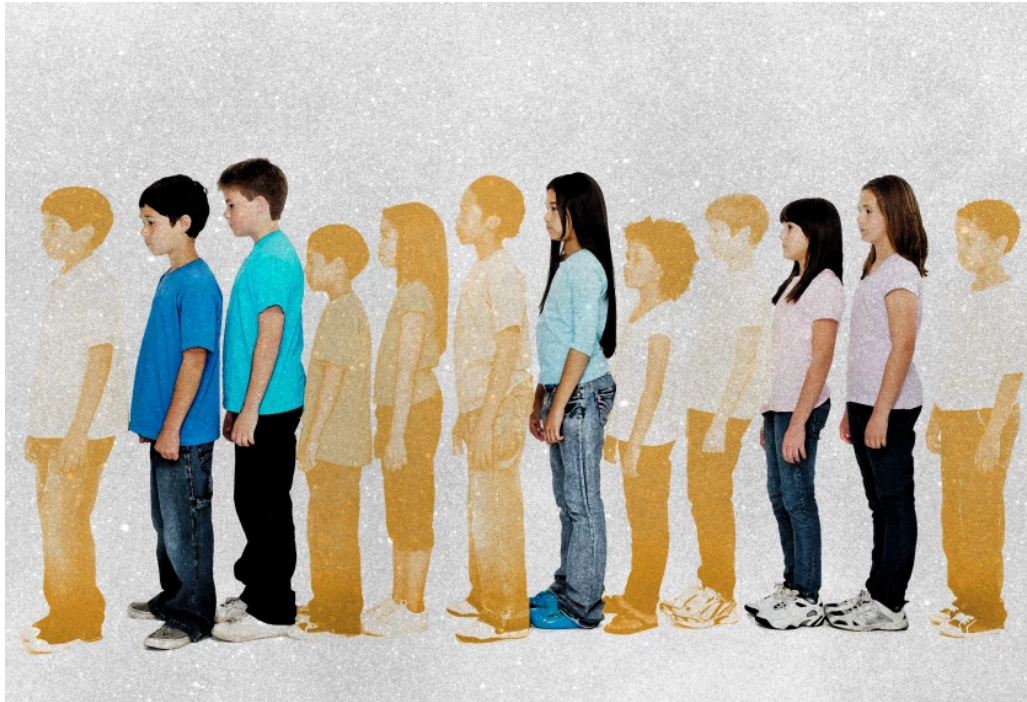


STUDENT WELL-BEING OPINION

# Does Social-Emotional Learning Help Students Who Could Benefit the Most? We Don't Know

There's a glaring hole in the research on SEL

By Christina Cipriano, Sheldon H. Horowitz & Gabbie Rappolt-Schlichtmann — December 06, 2021 5 min read



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Imagine if researchers leading a clinical trial of a new vaccine did not publish a breakdown of findings by demographic group. Without these data, it would be difficult to know, for example, how children reacted to it versus adults. Or how women fared compared with men. Or if pregnant women responded differently.

Without this information, it would be impossible to know if the vaccine is right for everyone.

Educational research should be held to a similarly high standard. To truly know if and how particular interventions are effective, we must understand how they work among subgroups of students.

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Let's talk about what we know about social and emotional learning from the research.

SEL is understood as an interrelated set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and strategies that underscore how we learn, form, and maintain supportive relationships; make empathetic and equitable decisions; and thrive both physically and psychologically.

Students today are more anxious, less connected, and more likely to have experienced trauma—a threat to their safety, agency, dignity, and belonging—than they were two years ago. And these experiences have been most profound for students marginalized by race, ethnicity, and ability. These students are more likely than their peers to have had their learning interrupted, be underserved, experience the loss of loved ones, and have their household income negatively impacted during the pandemic.

Fortunately, a significant portion of the \$190 billion allocated by Congress to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund must be specifically used to “respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student subgroups.” Accordingly, three-quarters of states list SEL or mental health as a top priority in their plans for ESSER funding, according to a recent review from our colleagues at the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

We know that high-quality, systemic SEL can help students identify emotions from social cues, set goals, consider multiple perspectives, and problem solve. We also know that SEL can reduce bullying and school suspensions and improve academic performance and school climate.

But what research hasn't yet established is how—or even whether—universal school-based SEL programs serve students with disabilities and students of color, who are among the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic [D](#). Unfortunately, the evidence for SEL's impact on racially- and ability-marginalized youth is murky at best and nonexistent at worst because we haven't looked deeply enough. And that's a big problem.

To be honest, education research is riddled with descriptions of school-based interventions that, once studied, are revealed to inequitably serve students with disabilities and/or those of color. To quantify the extent of this problem, teams at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the education nonprofit EdTogether reviewed [D](#) the current evidence describing whether SEL interventions are inclusive and representative. Our recent findings were nothing short of devastating.

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found that more than

75 percent of them make no mention whatsoever of students with disabilities, and fewer than 1 in 10 include students with disabilities in their analysis. Nearly 75 percent of studies do not report student race in their results, and only 1 of every 10 reports on the effect of SEL on students by racial or ethnic identity.

With limited evidence, how can we know who is being well-served by SEL?

Further, although most studies don't actively exclude students with disabilities (4 percent), most studies don't include them, either (only 7.4 percent). Students with disabilities may be underrepresented in SEL research in part because researchers are unaware that students with disabilities are present in their classrooms, such as the 1 in 5 students in the United States with learning disabilities—learning disabilities that are often invisible.

Speaking of visibility, we also found evidence of worrisome labeling practices for students. For example, some studies reported on subgroups of students where teachers assigned students to umbrella racial categories—including white or nonwhite or “minority” and “nonminority.” It's well established that knowing someone's race and ethnicity is a proxy for deeper understanding of their culture and experiences of privilege, marginalization, discrimination, and opportunity. Race and ethnicity demand this deeper level of inquiry within SEL, but we are yet to even scratch the surface in the current research.

The SEL research we studied did not describe or account for the experiences of the students and educators who are most likely to be marginalized in schools. Historically, racial- and ability-minoritized students have not benefited equally from educational interventions compared with their white, abled peers. In some cases, interventions have actually made education *less* accessible and actually *more* punitive for our most vulnerable youth.



We call on researchers and advocates for evidence-based SEL to commit to implementing research practices that are inclusive of all student identities.

We call on researchers and advocates for evidence-based SEL to commit to implementing research practices that are inclusive of all student identities. We must identify, confront, and overcome obstacles to breaking down demographics in SEL work, which can result in oversimplification or exclusion of key groups from findings. We must collect and disaggregate data based on disability status, race, ethnicity, and whether the student is impacted by poverty.

Only then can we begin to examine who benefits (or not) from SEL. This evidence would provide the necessary foundation from which to design and execute critical studies of SEL effects, through action-research and person-centered designs.

Further, policymakers and practitioners should promote the implementation of SEL approaches that recognize and empower students of differing and intersectional identities. Following a set of core principles for inclusive SEL from the National Center for Learning Disabilities is a great starting point to guide decisionmaking that meets the needs of all students. From meaningfully including students with disabilities and their families in the implementation process to making sure that technology tools needed to learn are fully accessible, school leaders and educators can put in place policies and practices that support all students.

If we want something to be different, we must do things differently.

As states and districts are making decisions about investing COVID-19 relief dollars, support for fully inclusive and representative SEL practices should be high on the list. Our students—and the education field as a whole—are counting on us.

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