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Getting Smart: Measuring and Evaluating Social and Emotional Skills

Monday, December 5, 2016

Join in online!

If you're interested in writing either an op-ed style article for our website or the session report, or a personal reflection blog post while you're here this week, please let Salzburg Global Editor, Louise Hallman know or email your submission directly to lhallman@salzburgglobal.org.

If you do intend to write for your own organization either whilst you're here or after the session, please make sure to observe the **Chatham House Rule** (information on which is in your Welcome Pack). If you're in any doubt, do not hesitate to contact Louise.

We'll be updating our website with summaries from the panels and interviews with our Fellows, all of which you can find on the session page: www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/566

You can also join in the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag #SGSedu and see all your fellow Fellows and their organizations on Twitter via the list www.twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-566

We're updating both our Facebook page www.facebook.com/SalzburgGlobal and our Flickr stream www.flickr.com/SalzburgGlobal with photos from the session during this week and also after the session. (If you require non-watermarked images for your own publication, please let Louise know.)

We will also be posting photos to Instagram www.instagram.com/SalzburgGlobal, and we encourage you to do so also, using the hashtag #SGSedu.



"Fascinating opening remarks on Day 1 has Session 566 off to a great start." Thanks to Heinrich Dirk for this shot!



Catherine Millett, Michael Nettles and Koji Miyamoto

Social and emotional investment

"Investing in social and emotional learning is just as important as investing in cognitive skills," declared Koji Miyamoto, senior economist at the World Bank's Education Global Practice, at the opening of the session *Getting Smart: Measuring and Evaluating Social and Emotional Skills*.

With emotional intelligence considered by the World Economic Forum to be one of the top ten most desirable skills for jobs in 2020, Miyamoto's statement will likely be adopted by many more people.

Improving students' SEL skills positively impacts not only the students' development but also society-at-large. As Michael T. Nettles, senior vice president of ETS stated in his opening remarks [see overleaf for remarks in full], "Being a good, empathic, thoughtful, even-tempered person able to work with others will make you happier, healthier, and more productive." (He followed up with the American expression "Duh!")

Research shows that SEL contributes to better self-esteem, mental health and stress management; better classroom behavior; greater success throughout schooling, from pre-K to graduate school; and even reducing crime rates.

SEL might not be a topic that makes

the headlines, but poor SEL influences many global issues from prejudice towards migrants and refugees to international conflicts.

Given the benefits of SEL, educators are now considering how best to assess and improve these skills, but as one Fellow put it: "There's a reason why these skills are known as 'hard to measure skills.'" As schools and students start to suffer from "assessment fatigue," policymakers will have a tough job convincing them to carry out yet more testing.

In formulating these assessments, contextual differences, such as diversity in cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, will need to be carefully considered and addressed. "The science has to be equitable," added Nettles.

Improving SEL necessitates inter-sectoral, interdisciplinary, and even international collaboration, drawing on expertise from not only education, but also psychology and neuroscience, among others. Over the course of five days, an eclectic cohort of 40 Fellows from 19 countries will now consider the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL), the possibilities of how to measure and improve it, and how to move it up global policy agendas.



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Why the “Whole Child” Matters

Senior Vice President of ETS and multi-time Salzburg Global Fellow on measuring social and emotional learning

Michael T. Nettles

I am delighted to see so many familiar faces – and also so many unfamiliar faces! It is great to be with old friends, and it is great to make new friends, also known as Allies in the Cause.

And it is a good cause! I would characterize our goal over the next few days as coming up with new ways to make students better people – better friends, better sons and daughters, better co-workers, better citizens, and of course better students – by developing their social and emotional skills. Social and emotional learning, or SEL, involves going beyond development of students’ cognitive skills to develop what is sometimes referred to as “the whole child.”

I like how our friend and colleague Andreas Schleicher, the Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, put it in one of his excellent blog entries on the Huffington Post last year:

Common sense tells us that social and emotional skills – such as perseverance, self-control or agreeableness – help individuals have more fulfilling lives. People who persevere and work hard are more likely to succeed in a highly dynamic and skill-driven labor market. Those who work hard are more likely to follow healthier lifestyles and remain fit. Individuals who are capable of coping with their emotions and adapting to change are more likely to cope with job loss, family disintegration or crime. And of course, social and emotional skills matter because they help develop and enforce cognitive skills. Children with self-control, for example, are more likely to finish reading a book, to complete a difficult maths problem or to follow through a science project.

That is as good an argument and as comprehensive a summary as I have seen as to why social and emotional learning matters. I am not surprised, given that the OECD is a leader in this research, which includes an international longitudinal study of skills development in major cities around the world. It is sure to advance the cause of social and emotional learning.

I do not want to spend too much time persuading you of the importance of SEL research and interventions.

Presumably, you are already persuaded and would not be here otherwise. But I do want to articulate what I presume is a shared belief – namely, that we are each here because we each believe that the success of our communities, our countries, and our infinitely diverse global society depends on one simple thing: our ability to get along with one another, whether in the playroom, the classroom, the workplace, the checkout line, the subway, and the public square. Perhaps most importantly, we have to get along with ourselves. As our friend and colleague from an earlier era, put it, “All of man’s misfortune comes from one thing, which is not knowing how to sit quietly in a room.”

If that is true, then far too few of us know how to sit quietly in our rooms. The world is a very troubled place.

Are we patient? Are we respectful? Are we tolerant of our differences in appearance, values, belief, habits and behavior? Do we persevere through adversity, and even failure? Can we empathize with the suffering of others? Are we able to work collaboratively and creatively toward shared goals? Can we keep our tempers in check, more or less?

These are some of the questions SEL asks. When we can answer them in the affirmative, we will have made the world a less troubled place. So this is important work that we are doing here this week.

A question that you may ask is why any of this is of interest to my organization, ETS. We are known for our world-class educational assessments: the TOEIC and TOEFL tests of English proficiency; the GRE graduate-school admissions test; the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the United States Dept. of Education; the PISA and PIAAC assessments for the OECD among them.

ETS has a longstanding interest in understanding and measuring noncognitive traits for both the academic and workplace arenas, and in designing tools to develop those traits. Among our initial assessments in this area was the ETS Personal Potential Index, a large-scale test that



Nettles speaks at the opening of the Salzburg Global Seminar session *Getting Smart: Measuring and Evaluating Social and Emotional Skills*

institutions of higher education used for evaluating resilience, teamwork, and other personal attributes considered important for postsecondary success.

More recently, we developed the ETS SuccessNavigator assessment. It is a 30-minute, nonproctored, online test to help colleges identify, and provide support for, at-risk first-year students. It does so by measuring a student’s behaviors, beliefs and skills that directly affect academic success, such as their commitment to academic success; their ability to anticipate and respond to the pressures and stresses of college life; and their access to resources to support their academic success.

For the workplace, we recently developed what we call the WorkforceAssessment for Job Fit. It is a web-based, employment-recruiting tool that measures a job applicant on six behavioral competencies associated with workplace success: flexibility and resilience; initiative and perseverance; responsibility; teamwork and citizenship; customer-service orientation; and problem solving and ingenuity. A companion measure, the WorkFORCE Program for Career Development, is an assessment and training program to support employee and job-seeker success by identifying the same six traits.

We have discontinued the Personal Potential Index, but we are intensifying our research and development of noncognitive traits and measures because of the growing evidence of their importance in school, work, and life from multiple fields and sources, including neuroscience, health,

employment, psychology, classroom management, learning theory, economics, and the prevention of youth problem behaviors. In our time together this week, we will learn about this expanding body of research, much of which is drawn from programs and interventions that have successfully integrated SEL with classroom practice and produced positive results.

In my own reading of the literature, I have found the evidence highly compelling. An organization that does excellent work in this area is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, which is based in Chicago. In 2011, CASEL conducted a meta-analysis of 213 studies involving more than 270,000 students. It showed an 11 percentile-point gain in academic achievement among students who participated in SEL programs compared to students who did not. Participating students also showed improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school.

A 2015 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found statistically significant associations between measured social-emotional skills in kindergarten and key young-adult outcomes across multiple domains of education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health. The findings would seem to support use of an SEL test to measure whether kindergartners are at risk for deficits in noncognitive skills later in life so that they can receive early intervention.

As for the cost of SEL interventions, CASEL points to a recent study by researchers at Columbia University showing that the measurable benefits of SEL exceed its costs, in some instances dramatically.

Cost, then, should not be an impediment to broad use of SEL in schools.

Neither should politics. But that is always a wild card in public education. That is certainly the case in the United States, where public education is far less centralized than in many other countries. Very often, public education becomes a proxy for political and cultural combat between the Left and the Right.

It would seem that SEL could be

just one more field of battle. I can see conservatives viewing social and emotional interventions as politically correct coddling of children who would benefit more from some old-fashioned discipline – what we call the “spare the rod, spoil the child” approach to pedagogy. And I can see progressives viewing SEL, with its emphasis on behavior, as a way for conservatives to infect the curriculum with conservative morality.

And yet ...

And yet two Washington, D.C., public policy think tanks – the Brookings Institution on the left, and the American Enterprise Institute on the right – recently collaborated on a study on ways to improve the prospects of people born into poverty. If there is anything that provokes partisan conflict, it is poverty relief.

And yet these partisan scholars found common ground on SEL. Their recommendations include educating “the whole child to promote social-emotional and character development as well as academic skills.” Even the authors seemed surprised by their agreement. But as they write in their report, “The only way forward, we believe, is to work together.”

It must have taken *enormous* amounts of social and emotional skills for them to work together, let alone agree!

Finally, this topic is of interest to ETS in the context of our previous Salzburg Global Seminars, in particular last year’s. It was titled “Untapped Talent,” and it asked the question “Can better testing and data accelerate creativity in learning and societies?” We answered in the affirmative. Our view was that much of the data being generated in our Information Age can be captured, analyzed and put to use to improve educational and workplace outcomes through such tools as data mining and analytics.

It was an excellent and productive session. In fact, participants suggested that we broaden the discussion beyond academic, technical and vocational skills to include social and emotional skills and measures.

And so here we are. This work is not without challenges. It is true that there is a foundation of excellent, groundbreaking, cross-discipline research in support of integrating SEL with cognitive classroom work. And

as I noted a moment ago, there is even political common ground on which SEL interventions can move forward.

But social and emotional skills measurement is still in its nascent stage. And to state the obvious, it is quite unlike measuring cognitive skills. We are not measuring a student’s ability to solve a math – or “maths” – problem, dissect a frog or identify five causes of the Second World War. Measuring soft skills entails an element of subjectivity. Moreover, some of the successful programs that have been studied were customized for local conditions and are not easily replicable or scalable. Wide adoption of SEL interventions will require development of reliable, valid and scalable measures.

But I do believe that will happen, hopefully in part through our discussions here this week.

It seems like a blindingly obvious proposition: Being a good, empathic, thoughtful, even-tempered person able to work with others will make you happier, healthier, and more productive. We have an expression in the United States to indicate something that is so obvious: “Duh.”

But just because 15 scholars in Washington, D.C., can agree on an issue does not mean that the issue is settled. It may just mean that the battle is joined. It is certain that there will be resistance to the very idea that schools should teach emotional skills instead of just focusing on the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic. And as always, there is unlikely to be one approach that will work for all countries and cultures. There should not be. The approach needs to fit the place, not the other way around.

Still, we are not starting from scratch. And social and emotional learning does have something for all parties. Teachers support it, employers want it, economists value it, and researchers are excited by it.

I hope we all view the next few days as an opportunity to learn from one another and to inspire, encourage, and motivate one another to bring back to our home countries a simple message: the *whole* child matters.

This article is an edited version of Nettles’ opening address at the session *Getting Smart: Measuring and Evaluating Social and Emotional Skills*



Sandeep Pandey



Mary Goretti Nakabugo



Koji Miyamoto

Hot Topic: “What does ‘Social and Emotional Learning’ mean to you and at what age do you think SEL development is most important?”

Chris Hammil-Stewart & Yeji Park

“It means developing the whole person: the cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of human development. I think we have to begin the learning process at birth. It begins when parents or guardians interact with young babies. It is the continuous quality of those interactions that develop people into human beings that are tolerant, that have a good work ethic and high-quality human interactions.”

Michael T. Nettles

Senior Vice President, ETS, USA

“It means learning things like resilience and grit. It’s massive in the UK at the moment. People are trying to think about how we can make our students more resilient [toward] things when they get upset by something and that they are able to deal with it in the right way and have the support behind them. I think it should start from primary school. Those things develop at a quite young age so you need to be dealing with it earlier rather than later at university when it’s too much of a problem by that point that they haven’t had that support.”

Eleanor Busby

Journalist, Times Educational Supplement, United Kingdom

“In my view, social and emotional skills have three core areas, or important dimensions, where social and emotional skills play an important role: the capacity to achieve goals; to work well with others; and to cope with emotional challenges. The sooner this development takes place the better, although some recent evidence suggests that sensitive periods are during early adolescence, not necessarily during early childhood – because this is a time when children’s social interactions change a lot.”

Koji Miyamoto

Senior Economist, World Bank’s Education Global Practice, USA

“Social and emotional learning, to me, refers to the emotional resilience of a learner, and their ability to absorb and respond to different experiences throughout the learning process. I think it’s important throughout the developmental cycle, but especially around adolescence, when people start to become more independent. It’s important when what they encounter in their environment has to be reconciled personally, rather than in a protected space.”

David Wilsey

Director of Masters Program in Sustainable Development Practice, University of Minnesota, USA

“For a long time in my country, teaching and learning has been focused on the academic, cognitive processes. At Twaweza, we have been assessing reading, writing and numeracy competencies, but I think in order to really assess and nurture a child – a whole person – we need to go on beyond those traditional subjects. We need to nurture skills like confidence, resilience, and communication, skills people will need in their real life, social and emotional skills. I think the earlier this takes place the better, these skills should start being nurtured before school.”

Mary Goretti Nakabugo

Senior Management Team, Twaweza East Africa, Uganda

“The child should be emotionally stable and socially sensitive to other human beings around him or her. He or she should also have these skills in order to contribute as a productive citizen in society. SEL development, in fact, starts even before the child goes to school in the family itself, from the values family instill in the child. I think it should start as early as possible.”

Sandeep Pandey

Vice-President, Socialist Party, India

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