The teaching of social and emotional learning (SEL) should be seen as a "vaccination," declared one Fellow as the sixth Salzburg Global Seminar program on SEL opened on March 10.

But a vaccination against what? Many countries’ education systems focus on producing future workers, and while "soft skills" including communication, collaboration; and critical thinking have all been highlighted as vital in the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" workplace, SEL can teach so much more: SEL can help produce better future citizens.

Besides teaching children "traditional" skills, as educators, it is also "our responsibility to make sure children do not grow up to be racists, rapists, suicidal or violent," and this is where the teaching of SEL comes in, with students learning such skills and values as empathy, respect; and resilience.

But how and when should SEL be taught? Many teachers are worried about being overburdened by the introduction of new subjects, especially if accompanied by new testing and assessments. However, rather than being introduced as a standalone course, panelists in Salzburg recommended that SEL is integrated into other subject areas, including STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), advocating for a "transdisciplinary" rather than simply multi- or interdisciplinary approach.

As well as being integrated into the curriculum, SEL should be offered at all school levels, starting as early as possible. While the human capacity for learning continues throughout life, moral development starts from age three, making pre-school a vital time for SEL.

Teaching of SEL does not belong only in the formal classroom. Children can learn much from their peers, communities, and families – and can teach others, including parents, as well as learn from them.

As well as aiding individuals’ and societies’ positive development, SEL can also help countries meet the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG4 (quality education) SDG5 (gender equality), SDG8 (decent work), SDG10 (reducing inequality), SDG16 (peace and justice) and SDG17 (partnership for the goals).

The five-day program, Social and Emotional Learning: Time for Action, is being held by Salzburg Global Seminar in partnership with ETS, Microsoft and Qatar Foundation International, together with Porticus, the USAID’s Education in Crisis and Conflict Network and the British Council. The 50 participants, including representatives of Ministries of Education, experts in education in crisis and conflict contexts and researchers, academics and practitioners, will tackle core topics in the development of SEL curricula, training, and assessment.
Catherine Millett: The Impact of Climate Change and Mass Migration on Education “is Already Severe and Will Only Intensify”

Session Co-Chair offers her opening remarks on SEL in times of conflict and crisis

Good afternoon! And welcome to Social and Emotional Learning: Time for Action.

My name is Catherine Millett, and I am a Senior Research Scientist in the Policy Evaluation & Research Center at Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey, in the United States.

My colleague Michael Nettles usually gives the opening remarks, but he will not join us until Wednesday. Tomorrow evening, Michael is receiving the John Hope Franklin award in recognition of his lifetime of work to improve the plight of African American people in education.

Thank you all for going out of your way to collaborate with us on this critically important work.

Thank you especially to the other co-chairs: Carine Allaf, the Senior Programs Advisor of the Qatar Foundation International; Cornelia Janke, Director of USAID’s Education in Crisis and Conflict Network; and Mark Sparvell, Thought Leader for Education Marketing, Microsoft Education. And to Clare Shine, Dominic Regester and the other members of Salzburg Global Seminar. Our nine-year collaboration is going strong!

This is the sixth SEL seminar that we have convened in partnership with Salzburg Global Seminar. The first was here in Salzburg in December 2016; followed by Santiago in November 2017, the Dead Sea in Jordan in February 2018; ETS in Princeton in June 2018; and back here again last December.

In May of 2016, Clare, Michael and I did not originally plan on holding so many SEL seminars. That we have is a measure of the tremendous global interest in the topic. At the end of this week, Dominic, Faye and I estimate that 264 people representing 197 organizations from 57 countries will have discussed the importance of traits variously referred to as social and emotional skills, soft skills, 21st-century skills, noncognitive skills, and personality traits.

Clearly, there is something about Social and Emotional Learning that resonates powerfully among educators, researchers, and policymakers throughout the world. That "something," we all seem to agree, is that social and emotional skills are foundational to individual, and thus community and global, well-being.

SEL has arrived! And so have you! And on behalf of ETS, I thank you for your interest.

A Shift in Focus

We designed our previous seminars to be opportunities to learn from one another about how SEL is understood, applied, and used in different countries, cultures, and classrooms. As we met and talked, the world marched on. And not always in positive directions for education or for global peace, or even global survival.

Then and now, three perils in particular pose grave and urgent challenges: forced mass migration; catastrophic climate change; and the political challenges they reflect and provoke, including violent conflict.

Climate change, mass migration, and political conflict have tumultuous and destructive effects on access to education and intellectual development. And those effects are likely to grow worse.

And so we thought we should widen the focus for this seminar. So in addition to examining how to deliver SEL in conventional classroom settings, we will discuss how to teach and measure soft skills in the wake of natural disasters and among refugee populations.

Climate Change

This is an education seminar, not a climate-change symposium. But it’s important to create a context for our discussions. So here is a brief overview of the climate situation.

According to the 2018 National Climate Assessment conducted by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, Earth’s climate is changing faster than at any time in the history of modern civilization. Climate change is already causing more extreme and frequent rainfall, floods, droughts and wildfires, and damaging infrastructure, ecosystems, and social systems along the way.

In a widely read article that he expanded into a book that was published last month, the journalist David Wallace-Wells reported the dire findings of climate scientists. Based on current trends, rising temperatures, desertification and coastal flooding will make much of the world uninhabitable or close to it by the end of this century. In one pungent passage, Wallace-Wells refers to the \“Bahrain-ing of New York,\” in which New York City becomes as hot as Bahrain, one of the hottest places in the world today.

As with every disaster, low-income and marginalized populations are likely to suffer the most given that they have the least in resources and ability to prepare for and respond to extreme weather.

Nor do they fare as well in the recovery process. In the United States, a recent public radio investigation showed that white and wealthier Americans often receive more financial support from the federal government than their less well-off neighbors. As the report put it, after a disaster, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the gap between rich and poor widens.

Refugees and Migration

As for mass migration and education, the impacts of climate change couldn’t come at a worse time.

Mass migration is already at crisis levels. The United Nations Refugee Agency reported that at the end of 2016, there were close to 66 million people...
throughout the world who had been forcibly displaced from their homes because of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations.

It was the highest total since the end of World War II. For a point of reference, this number approximates the populations of France (66,859,768) or the United Kingdom (65,595,565) in 2016.

Not surprisingly, the countries that produced the greatest numbers of forcibly displaced people were those riven by conflict, including Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, South Sudan, and Syria.

- About 22.5 million of the total were refugees driven abroad, just over half of whom were children under age 18.
- Globally, there were 6.4 million school-age refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the end of 2016. More than half of them did not attend a single day of school throughout the year.
- As for higher education, the UN reports that tertiary enrollment among refugees is “stuck” at 1% despite improvements due to expanded scholarships and other support programs.

SEL Assessment and ETS

Regardless of the setting, measuring such soft skills as tolerance and collaboration is much more complex than measuring math or reading skills. And while full-scale SEL classroom programs are proliferating, they can be expensive and require hundreds of hours of teacher training.

So it is good news that so many of our colleagues are working to provide educators with inexpensive, high-quality learning tools that they can use quickly and easily in emergency education situations.

It is such a challenging context. Just locating the educators in a refugee setting, let alone organizing and leveraging their expertise, can be a monumental task, as is coordinating the students.

And that’s in the best case. There are no guarantees that every group of climate or conflict-displaced refugees will include a roster of experienced, professionally trained educators. In December Rena Deitz with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) shared with us that sometimes the assignment to teach falls to the oldest student, who can be a 15- or 16-year-old kid suffering his or her own trauma, and who like most kids needs the familiarity of the school routine to feel secure in a profoundly insecure environment.

You can see why the teaching tools need to be user-friendly, and readily available.

What today we call Social and Emotional Learning, soft skills or noncognitive skills has been a long-standing concern of my organization, ETS.

Henry Chauncey, the founder and first president of ETS, pondered the importance of soft skills in 1949, two years after ETS’s founding. In his handwritten notebooks that Michael and I examined in the ETS archives in preparation for the June meeting, he commented on what he called the “non-intellectual factors which affect success or failure.”

Dr. Chauncey was interested in investigating such personal qualities as drive, motivation, conscientiousness, intellectual stamina and the ability to get along with others, as well as ways to “ascertain whether [an] individual will be [a] good member of the community, in college and later in life.”

So this is an area that we have been involved in for a very long time. Among our activities, we are:

- working with the OECD on its Study on Social and Emotional Skills;
- examining SEL measures for the US Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP);
- integrating into our data analyses and publications such effective measures as communication skills, achievement motivation, intellectual engagement, sociability, working independently, time management, leadership, and risk-taking;
- and advising the Assessment Work Group of the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL.

Conclusion

Separately and in combination, climate change, mass migration, and violent conflict pose incredibly complex challenges to educators. Floods and fires rarely announce themselves in advance, and so there is rarely time to prepare for the consequences.

But these forces are not looming. They are happening. Their impact on education is already severe and will only intensify. Based on David Wallace-Wells’s reporting, for every half-degree of warming, societies will see between a 10 and 20 percent increase in the likelihood of armed conflict due to resource competition and forced migration. Various estimates place the number of climate refugees anywhere between 100 million and 1 billion by 2050. The fact that there is such a term “climate refugee” is itself a warning.

As educators, researchers and policymakers, our responsibility is to figure out what and how:

- What will we need to do to ensure that students will have access to quality educational resources regardless of their circumstances and conditions?
- And how do we get ready today for what we know will be coming tomorrow?

If Social and Emotional Learning is as powerful and important as we say, then we better figure it out quickly.

Thank you very much. And I look forward to working with you over the next few days.

Partners’ hopes for the week ahead

This week’s program is supported by ETS, Microsoft, the Qatar Foundation International and USAID’s Education in Crisis and Conflict Network.

“Whatever I’m hoping this week to do is to seek to understand. To understand the perspectives from colleagues from other countries, other contexts. To better understand their challenges and their opportunities. I’m also hoping to be able to raise awareness around the free research and resources that will help them, in that work."

Mark Sparvell
Thought Leader for Education, Microsoft, USA

“Whatever I do is very much aligned with this thinking on social and emotional learning. As has been stated a few times today, the definition of what that looks like is so varied and different. … Our goal for the week is to also get more people together to have these discussions on this very important topic.”

Carine Allaf
Senior Programs Advisor, Qatar Foundation International (QFI), USA
HOT TOPIC:
How Do We Convince the Unconvinced of SEL?

Lucy Browett
““In the context of my experience, I have never yet come across anyone who is truly unconvinced. The closest I’ve come to seeing people who are unconvinced are those who say, “Ah, but what about when the kids go home and see their parents behaving badly? Doesn’t that negate the learning?” The answer is no, it absolutely doesn’t... One can quote science at those who are unconvinced on that level to say it’s a matter of physical brain architecture.”

Leslee Udwin
Founder and President, Think Equal, UK

“This idea of recognizing that social emotional learning is not something that we teach in isolation. That we have to figure out ways to integrate social emotional learning into the curriculum, that we would see in standard educational systems. That science and reading and math have to be integrated with social emotional learning as well as civic engagement.”

Carol O’Donnell
Executive Director, Smithsonian Science Education, Smithsonian Institution, USA

“I’m not always approached by people who are unconvinced. But in saying that, most frequently, people are interested in data and research... What I have found is that, when we collect the student voice or the voice of a community that talks about what they really want for their children and how they really want society to be in the future, things like SEL become really prevalent.”

Pauline Cleaver
Associate Deputy Secretary, Early Learning and Student Achievement, Ministry of Education, New Zealand

Have an opinion on our HOT TOPIC? Tweet @SalzburgGlobal with the hashtag #SGSedu