

Understanding Parent/Caregiver Concerns About Social and Emotional Learning

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Social and emotional (SE) skills can be defined as interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors that are important for adaption to and successful performance in educational and workplace settings (Casillas et al., 2015). These skills are related to important life outcomes such as academic achievement (e.g., Mammadov, 2022; Poropat, 2009), appropriate behavior and healthy relationships (e.g., Domitrovich et al., 2017), and workplace success (e.g., Barrick et al., 2001). Additionally, students can improve these skills through social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2018).

While multiple bodies of research show the great majority of parents/caregivers express favorable views toward SEL intervention programming (e.g., Committee for Children, 2022; Daley et al., 2022; Murano et al., 2022), there remains a small, vocal subset of parents who express opposition toward SEL (e.g., Anderson, 2022). The goal of this study was to explore and better understand these parent/caregiver concerns surrounding SEL.

To gain a better understanding of negative sentiments toward SEL, we invited parents/caregivers who had a) participated in past ACT surveys examining perspectives toward SEL and b) expressed some extent of opposition toward SEL in their responses (samples drawn from Daley et al., 2022¹; Daley et al., 2022²; Murano et al., 2022³). In total, 529 parents/caregivers were identified as having some degree of unfavorable response in the previous three studies and were invited to participate in the current study. Invitees were informed that the survey was voluntary and unincentivized. Seventy-nine parents/caregivers began the survey, and 51 completed the survey in its entirety. Of respondents who reported demographic information ($n = 51$), the mean age was 49.9 years old ($SD = 5.07$), 72.5% of respondents were female, and 94.1% held a bachelor's degree or higher. Participants identified their race/ethnicity as White (66.7%), Hispanic/Latinx (7.8%), American Indian/Alaska Native (3.9%), Black (2.0%), two or more races (2.0%), or preferred not to respond (17.6%).

The first section of the survey included items on common misconceptions about SEL that could be viewed as potentially concerning by parents/caregivers. We asked respondents to rate their

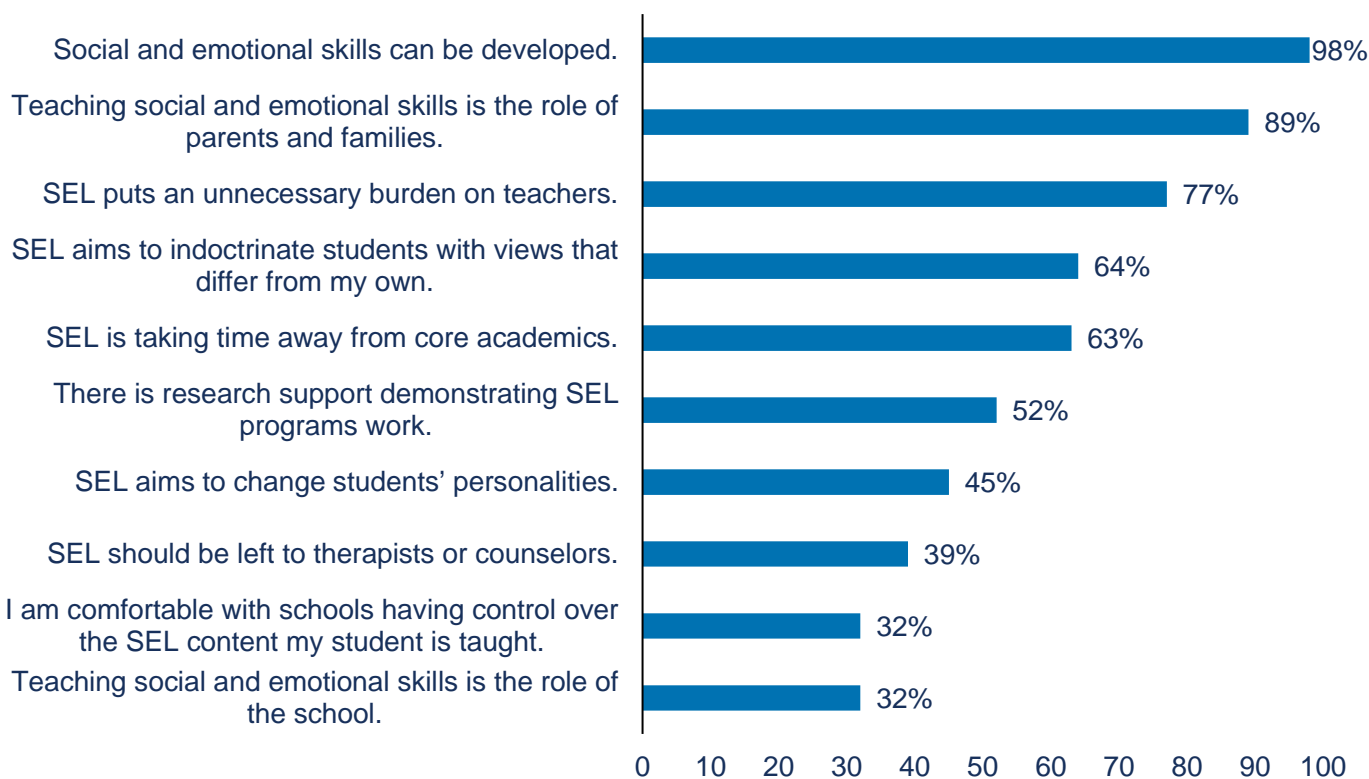
¹ 175 parents/caregivers were invited from a starting sample of 773. They were included if they indicated that, out of 12 options, SEL would be the least preferable course for their student to take OR indicated that they were *very unsupportive*, *unsupportive*, or *somewhat unsupportive* of SEL.

² 152 parents/caregivers were invited from a starting sample of 1,380. They were included if they responded *somewhat disagree*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree* to the following item: "Social and emotional skills are related to success in high school" OR if they rated at least one of five social and emotional skills as *slightly important* or *not at all important*.

³ 202 parents/caregivers were invited from a starting sample of 664. They were included if they rated at least one of five social and emotional skills as *slightly important* or *not at all important* OR responded *somewhat disagree*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree* to one of three items regarding the value of SEL to parents, teachers, or school staff.

level of agreement with each statement using a six-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). Figure 1 shows the percentage of parents/caregivers with unfavorable views toward SEL who reported some level of agreement (*somewhat agree*, *agree*, or *strongly agree*) for each statement.

Figure 1. Percentages of Parents/Caregivers with Unfavorable Views Toward SEL Who Agreed with Each Statement



From these survey items, the first conclusion we drew was that despite demonstrating some opposition toward SEL based on past survey item responses, the vast majority (98%) of respondents still believed SE skills can be developed. This is promising given the potential of SEL intervention programming to help students develop these skills. Second, the juxtaposition of high endorsement of the “Teaching social and emotional skills is the role of parents and families” item (89% agreement) with the low endorsements of items about the role of counselors and schools in teaching SEL (32–39% agreement) suggests these respondents clearly thought SEL should have a more prominent role at home, rather than in schools.

Additionally, we asked respondents to answer two open-ended questions to better understand their concerns: “Please expand on any of the views above that resonate with you most,” and “Is there anything that might make you more supportive of SEL?” We used an inductive coding approach to organize the responses into themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Table 1 summarizes the themes articulated by respondents for both questions and the number of responses falling into each theme.

Table 1. Responses to Open-Ended Survey Items by Theme

Please expand on any of the views above that resonate with you most	Is there anything that might make you more supportive of SEL?
SEL should be the role of both parents and teachers ($n=11$)	Increased parental involvement ($n=6$)
SEL is primarily the role of families ($n=8$)	No/not willing to change stance ($n=6$)
Concern about additional burden on teachers ($n=3$)	To keep SEL out of schools and in the home only ($n=4$)
Conflation of SEL with other things (i.e., politics, diversity, equity, and inclusion, social justice, self-help) ($n=4$)	Increased focus on academics ($n=3$)
Concerns about uses of SEL data ($n=1$)	Increased funding and access to low-cost, effective materials ($n=2$)
Concern about SEL taking away from core academics ($n=1$)	Guarantee that politics stay separate from SEL ($n=1$)

While Anderson (2022) calls attention to the conflation of SEL with politics and Critical Race Theory (CRT), these data show that only five parent/caregiver responses out of 79 responses explicitly expressed a similar concern, and no responses explicitly mentioned CRT. This represents a small subset of not only this follow-up survey, but also of the larger initial sample of participants who had expressed a negative view toward SEL ($n = 529$). It is noteworthy that the total sample size of 51 participants in this study remains small and conclusions therefore have limited generalizability. However, the lack of any CRT-focused language in this sample of parents/caregivers who had initially expressed opposition toward SEL is promising in that it suggests the conflation of SEL with CRT is not as rampant as initially portrayed in the Anderson (2022) article.

Instead, the most frequent responses from parents/caregivers who initially expressed unfavorable views toward SEL are that they desire to be more involved in their students' SE skill development. As one respondent stated, "I am already supportive. But it needs to be collaborative effort between schools and parents. Parents need to be informed, and agree with what and how their children are being educated." While this represents a valid concern from parents/caregivers, it is actionable for SEL providers and those implementing SEL in school settings. In Table 2 below, we highlight this concern as well as others and potential ways to mitigate these concerns. By engaging in these actions, SEL providers and those tasked with its implementation in schools can potentially help SEL become more appealing, even to parents who have expressed concerns about it.

Table 2. Parent/Caregiver Concerns about SEL and Potential Solutions

Concern about SEL	Potential Mitigation Strategies
<p>SEL should be the role of both parents and teachers (<i>n</i>=11); SEL is primarily the role of families (<i>n</i>=8); Desire for increased parental involvement (<i>n</i>=6)</p>	<p>Develop SEL programming that includes educational materials for families and at-home instructional components</p> <p>Hold parent/caregiver events at school to increase understanding and awareness of SEL programming</p> <p>Establish home-school connections through the teaching of SEL content</p>
<p>Conflation of SEL with other things (i.e., politics, diversity, equity, and inclusion, social justice, self-help) (<i>n</i>=5)</p>	<p>Ensure clear definitions are provided for SEL and social and emotional skills</p> <p>Educate all stakeholders on what SEL is and what SEL is not</p> <p>Assist school districts in developing communication plans when SEL programs are instituted</p>
<p>Concern about SEL taking away from core academics (<i>n</i>=1); Desire for an increased focus on academics (<i>n</i>=3)</p>	<p>Emphasize research findings showing that SEL programming contributes to gains in academics, rather than taking away from academic achievement (e.g., Corcoran et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011), and that these skills also contribute to workplace success (e.g., Barrick et al., 2001)</p> <p>Integrate SEL into core academic instruction</p> <p>Provide examples of ways in which SEL has been incorporated into academic curriculum without interfering with overall academic time on task</p>
<p>Concern about additional burden on teachers (<i>n</i>=3)</p>	<p>Ensure teachers receive sufficient education and professional development on teaching SEL before being expected to teach content in classrooms</p> <p>Provide sufficient resources, including time, to support teachers in their efforts to teach SEL</p> <p>Conduct user experience research when developing SEL curriculum materials to ensure SEL programming is designed in a user-friendly way</p>

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