SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) in and through education: taking stock for improved implementation

Concept Note
Workshop - 11-12 February 2021

1. Background

The Sustainable Development Goal on Education (SDG 4) - in all of its dimension - requires that countries seek to design education systems that address the learning needs of children and adults – women and men – in all of their dimensions and from a humanistic perspective. As stated in Target 4.7, quality education is not only concerned with the provision of basic literacy and numeracy, but with the need to ensure that learners, of all ages and throughout life, are equipped with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours they need to help build just, peaceful and sustainable societies. This implies ensuring that education systems foster mutual understanding, respect and care among all people and for the planet we share and empower learners to engage responsibly and creatively with the (rapidly) changing world. This is critical not only to achieve the Education Targets but also to support the implementation of all 17 SDGs.

Built into this holistic vision of education is the well-researched premise (Singh & Duraiappah, 2020) that learners are most likely to develop such skills, if they are exposed to three types of inter-related learning experiences: cognitive, social and emotional and behavioural.

Though less intentionally emphasized in the learning process, SEL is understood as '*a process through which children develop in their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to succeed at important developmental tasks*' (Denham, 2018), has tremendous value for numerous reasons some of which are outlined below, if implemented appropriately:

- **To support personal well-being and academic performance.** Social and emotional learning skills are strongly linked to academic performance and the comprehensive development of students' competencies. Research has shown that good SEL skills explicitly introduced in curricula and supported by school practices are strongly correlated with increased academic performance (Zins, Weissberg, Wang and Walberg, 2004). Social and emotional skills such as attention and emotion regulation can help critical thinking and informed decision making (Arslan & Demirtas, 2016). Inversely, fear and stress have a detrimental impact on learners' ability to learn, their health and well-being (Immordino, Yang & Damasio, 2007). When learners are socially connected and emotionally secure, they are best placed to focus on academic content and engage in learning.

- **For the achievement of several SDG 4 Targets**. Social and emotional skills is key to the achievement of Target 4.7 but not exclusively. SEL is implied, if not made explicit, in several SDG 4 Targets. For example, the inclusion of "*relevant and effective learning outcomes*" in Target 4.1 and "*..youth and adults who have relevant skills… for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship*" in Target 4.4 allude to not only cognitive skills but also to SEL skills such as teamwork, and conflict resolution, among

others, which are fundamental for the world of work (Deming, 2015) . Children, young people and adults can all benefit from SEL as it is part of lifelong learning and growth. For children and adolescents in particular, explicit training in SEL skills enables them to express themselves fully and clearly, develop better and healthier relationships with peers and adults and feel more connected. As such, SE skills are also key for the achievement of Target 4.a on safe, non-violent and inclusive learning environments.

- **For the achievement of all SDGs.** Education that makes full use of SEL has a major role to play in generating shifts in mindsets and behaviors, which are critical for the achievement of all the SDGs, in particular 1 (no poverty), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), 15 (life on land), 3 (health and well-being), 16 (peace and rule of law), etc.

- **To face threats to peace.** There is an increasing demand by Member States to support their efforts to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, through providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (SDG 16). Achieving this goal requires addressing social exclusion, discrimination, hate speech, rising trends of intolerance, often fuelled by a sense of powerlessness, fear and high levels anxiety and depression among the youth (SDG 3) (WHO, 2017). This demand has been most recently reaffirmed by slowly emerging reports of stress, social anxiety, emotional upheaval and fearful insecurity in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (OHCHR, 2020).

- **To specifically face the challenges of sustainability.** Anxiety is arising among people, especially youth, being part of the generation of an "apocalyptic future" to whom we need to offer a *pedagogy for hope* valuing SEL so that they are able to engage in society in a constructive manner, knowing that there is an uncertain future. Encouraging learners to undertake transformative action to address sustainability challenges requires SEL in order to promote skills such as persistence and determination as well as empathetic awareness of the interconnectedness of people to the planet, which is one of the key features of the new global framework ESD for 2030 (UNESCO, 2019a).

While it is clear that SEL is de facto, part of any learning process, it is not so clear that it is being provided today in a way that generates the above positive outcomes. Policymakers and practitioners in education (curriculum developers, teacher trainers, school administrators, teachers, educators, school personnel, etc.), as well as parents and families, are not always aware of its importance and committed to its promotion.

According to a recently conducted UNESCO study of ten countries (UNESCO, 2019b), there seems to be a declining emphasis on the social and emotional dimension of learning – notably as concerns education for sustainable development (ESD) and global citizenship education (GCED) – from pre-primary (PPE) to upper secondary (USE) educational levels. Concomitantly, from PPE to USE, the study also observed an increased emphasis on the cognitive dimension of learning. This is the situation in the ten countries examined though they all exhibit a major pattern of commitment to the three learning dimensions and across education levels (including, pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary) in national education laws, policies and strategies.

Why develop guidance tools for effective and meaningful SEL

- As there is a considerable body of evidence that supports the idea that SEL has a positive impact on both learning and broader social outcomes (Singh & Duraiappah, 2020), multiple frameworks for SEL have been developed over the last decades by various actors (academic institutions, Foundations, NGOs, IGOs, etc). However, many if not most of these Frameworks focus primarily on defining social and emotional competencies and designing approaches for their development at the school and classroom levels, or by ensuring the integration of SEL in the curriculum. We have not come across any tool or guidelines that consider the challenges of SE learning from a whole-education system perspective, thereby ensuring that SEL is part and parcel of the education experience and, realistically, integrated throughout the education system (including policies, curriculum, pedagogical approaches, teacher development, teaching/learning materials, classroom management, school policies,

governance, etc). Nor have we found any guidance on how to make full use of existing SEL approaches to both boost academic attainment and foster broader outcomes such as improved health and well-being, and responsible engagement in the building of a more peaceful just, gender equal and sustainable world. Finally, it remains to be clarified how to select the most (culturally) appropriate approach for SEL, when a vast majority of high-profile educational psychology research is conducted on children that represent a small fraction of the world's population (Arnett, Jeffrey J., 2018; Yussen, Steve, 2016).

- The task of changing practices and implementing new approaches within education systems that are supportive of SEL, is complex and involves the engagement of all education stakeholders, at every level: policy makers, teacher training institutions, school leaders and staff, teachers, non-formal educators, PTA, etc. Clarifying what each category of actors can do to support SEL is required.

This work proposes to address these challenges, building on UNESCO's wealth of experience and expertise in SEL and its related fields.

2. Overarching goal of the inception workshop

This workshop is jointly organized by the Section of Global Citizenship and Peace Education at UNESCO Headquarters and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development, with the overarching intent to improve UNESCO's ability to support countries in their efforts to provide equitable and inclusive quality education to all learners throughout life (SDG 4), making full use of current evidence on the benefits of social and emotional learning to improve the content, delivery and learning outcomes of education. The workshop deliberations will guide the design of guidance tools for the effective integration of SEL throughout the education system.

This work should also be seen as an initiative that grows from the idea that the future of people and our planet depends on the ability of education systems to provide a holistic learning experience, which '*prepares learners to become'* (UNESCO's Futures of Education Initiative, 2020) informed and engaged agents of change, actively contributing to the building of a more just, sustainable and peaceful future.

3. Specific objectives of the inception workshop

The workshop will specifically aim to

- Review existing approaches to, and conceptualizations of, SEL within UNESCO and beyond, building on the recently launched *Rethinking Learning: A Review of SEL frameworks for education(*Singh and Duraiappah, 2020*)*.

- Exchange experiences on the implementation of programmes, projects, and approaches that promote SEL in various regions (challenges and lessons learned from ongoing work, opportunities for scaling up efforts, effective approaches to implementation, knowledge gaps, etc).

- On the basis of this exchange, collect ideas on how UNESCO can and should help to ensure that SEL is effectively promoted at all levels of education, throughout life and in various educational settings (formal and non-formal) in view of achieving quality education, and Target 4.7 in particular.

This workshop is envisaged as a first step in a process of consultations and reflections that will help identify the type of tools, resources and support that can be provided by UNESCO to help countries strengthen and improve their ability to provide effective and impactful SEL. The outcomes of this first consultation will inform a second follow up workshop that will be organized in the following month to address more in details the development of the guidance tools and resources that will be produced in the course of 2021.

4. Expected outcomes

The documentation collected in preparation of the workshop and the key discussion points during the workshop will be summarized in a succinct '*Outcome Document*" that aims to;

- Clarify key features of UNESCO's approach to SEL (how it is understood through UNESCO's areas of ongoing work and being promoted and implemented at the national, regional and international levels), including points of disagreement and tensions if any;
- Map UNESCO's main initiatives, programmes and projects that are promoting SEL (Templates to be completed by colleagues);
- Effective approaches to implementation, challenges and lessons learned from existing research and experience
- Identify a small number of priority actions to be undertaken collaboratively in the course of 2021 and possibly during the 41st biennium (41 C/5) in support of SEL.
- Collect ideas on the type of tools that could be developed in 2021 in order to support countries in their efforts to deliver effective and impactful SEL (target audience, content, format, development process, key partners, etc).

5. Preliminary agenda of the inception workshop

The detailed agenda will be shared with participants closer to the date of the event. In the meantime, here below is an indication of the main discussion points of the meeting.

I. Introduction – objectives, process, expected outputs

II. UNESCO's ongoing programmes, projects and initiatives promoting SEL (focusing on conceptualizations of SEL, approaches to its promotion/implementation, evidence, available tools & resources, main partners, etc)

III. Lessons learned from the implementation of SEL related programmes and projects in view of supporting further integration of SEL

IV. Brainstorming around the future guidance

V. Conclusion and next steps.

6. Participants in the inception workshop

The online workshop will convene 30-35 participants, including around 5-10 (maximum) external experts and practitioners with experience implementing SEL strategies and programmes at the national and international levels.

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