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## Social and Emotional Competence of School Leaders: A Scoping Review<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Socio-emotional skills are now being increasingly recognized as important contributors to the effectiveness of educational systems and programs. This has been demonstrated in various studies regarding the nurturing of teachers' social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, that yield the same result: the crucial importance of improving students' academic performance and their socio-emotional skills.

This study examined research addressing the effects of SEL development in the school setting. It found that teachers have been the only target beneficiaries of SEL development work to date, leaving school leaders (principals) out of the picture. As the latter represent the bridge between the people outside and those inside the schools, targeting school principals for training in socio-emotional competencies (SEC) appears very urgent for more impactful results in the learning and socio-emotional development of teachers and students.

Furthermore, developing the SEC of principals will also allow them to curb emotional overload and flourish in their professional career development as well as beyond the school setting and inside their households.

**Keywords:** Social and Emotional Learning, Scoping-Review, Socio-Emotional Competencies, School Leader

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<sup>1</sup> Scoping review is a preliminary assessment of potential size and scope of available research literature

## 1. Introduction

The educational system of a country is a highly sensitive and critical domain for its development (Robinson & Aronica, 2016). The ubiquity of technology combined with other dynamics created these recent years issues that are becoming increasingly more complex to deal with in education (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018). In fact, they became even more difficult to address with the outbreak of COVID-19. In schools, the emotional burden of the pandemic that has amplified existing issues affects every single actor of the system from the parents and their children to the teachers and principals (Chandra, 2020). As principals are at the top of the hierarchy, there is even greater pressure on them. Indeed, they are held accountable for students' achievement, teachers' satisfaction, and fruitful relations between their school and the community. In recent years, social-emotional learning (SEL) has appeared as a valuable educational component to help manage these dynamics in schools. However, it has been developed with a focus on students and has neglected the Socio-Emotional Competencies of School Leaders (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2020) whereas the whole school system would greatly benefit from emotionally-aware and socially intelligent principals. Thereby, this study aims to be a scoping review examining the literature on socio-emotional skills, socio-emotional learning, and the benefits of developing SEC-based training to help principals build school cultures where students turn into their best possible selves.

## 2. Socio-emotional skills

A social group is a collection of people interacting in a way that creates interdependence relationships between the members inside the group, thereby shaping the core identity of the group with respect to other groups (Verena & Oberlé, 1999). The grouping of people with a common interest in education or training is the most typical one inside schools or as part of workshops. Learning to get along with others and maintain healthy relationships is therefore as delicate as learning to read and do mathematics (Peplar, 2017).

The concept of socio-emotional skills assimilated to socio-emotional intelligence stems from two other terminologies: Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence.

The first scientists who labelled such a thing as Emotional Intelligence are Salovey and Mayer in 1990. They define Emotional Intelligence (EI) as "a set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and others." Daniel Goleman seen as the progenitor of Emotional Intelligence in "Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ" (1996), provides a more comprehensive definition of this concept stating that it revolves around three core elements:

- Knowing one's feelings and being able to deal with these feelings without being swamped by them;
- Being able to motivate oneself to do one's work, be creative and give one's best;
- And being able to perceive what others feel as well as handling relationships effectively.

On the other hand, Social Intelligence as a two-fold concept by Gardner (2000) is defined as the interpersonal ability to read the social signs from others, and the intrapersonal ability to make sense of our own emotions. The slight difference with emotional intelligence lies in the thought process which is about feelings for Social Intelligence rather than the emotion (generated by the feeling) to which Emotional Intelligence refers. (Rozenal, 2018).

Two elements characterize Social Intelligence (Goleman, 2007): social awareness and social facility, the first being about sensing and the second about acting.

With that being said, most authors recognize that social and emotional intelligence despite being different concepts intertwine. Devis-Rozental (2018) recognizes that they are so interconnected that it sometimes becomes difficult to make a clear distinction between the two concepts. She goes on to elaborate a definition of socio-emotional intelligence as:

“The ability to integrate feeling, intuition and cognition to acknowledge, understand, manage, apply and express our emotions and social interactions at the right time, for the right purpose in the right context and with the right person.”

Indeed, enacting this ability in the context of learning is what leads to socio-emotional learning.

### **3. Concept of socio-emotional learning**

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) stems from the application of social and emotional skills in an educational setting. There is a consensus (Weissberg et al, 2015) on the fact that SEL is a process by which children and adults effectively acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies needed to comprehend and deal with their emotions, establish and fulfill positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, build and maintain positive relationships, and make mature decisions.

From this we can derive what CASEL (2013) defines as the five key competencies of SEL self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision making. Self-awareness is related to the accurate understanding and assessment of one's emotions, personal and social identity, personal goals and values. Self-management ability seems to be the direct sequel to self-awareness as it refers to regulating emotions and behaviors; for example, delay gratification, control one's impulses, perseverance...The social awareness domain deals with the capacity to comprehend the views of others sympathize and feel compassion. Interpersonal skills are those skills encompassing active listening, working collaboratively, standing up to selfishness, constructively handling conflict, seeking help, and providing leadership when needed, all of which help maintain healthy and rewarding relationships. Responsible decision-making implies a critical examination of ethics, security concerns, and attitudinal norms for risky behavior to make considerate and meaningful choices about individual and collective conduct in social interactions.

The effectiveness of SEL programs in achieving positive outcomes is currently well documented. In fact, four independent meta-analyses of student performance in relation to their participation in school-based SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011; Wigglesworth et al., 2016; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017) have come to the same conclusion: the students that participated in these programs, compared to control groups, indicate gains on a spectrum of behavioral, attitudinal, emotional, and academic outcomes that are apparent in the immediate, post-intervention period as well as during different follow-up periods. What comes as more striking is that the greater gains have been reported for all these studies on academic achievement. Indeed, academic performance results show an 11 percentile point gain, over the long term, for students who participated in such programs over those who did not.

That said, for anything to be implemented correctly in the school environment, no actor counts as more important than the teachers, as they are the ones in direct contact with students. And SEL does not derogate from this rule. Indeed, teachers are the driving force behind the successful implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and practices in schools (Kimberly, 2017). To this end, the emotional competencies constituting teacher emotional capital are emerging as key professional competencies for

dealing with the new challenges and demands of the teaching profession (Beaumont & Garcia, 2020; Gendron, 2008b).

Poor emotion management among teachers has been noted to negatively affect academic outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2019). That justifies several interventions these recent years, moving in the direction of improving teachers' social-emotional skills and managing stress in schools (Kimberly, 2017).

With that in mind, when one takes a look at the hierarchy in a school setting, it is easily noticeable that the responsibility of the social and emotional well-being of teachers and in turn of students is largely dependent on the social-emotional skills of principals (Mahfouz et al., 2019).

#### **4. Principals in supporting socio-emotional learning**

Emotional intelligence is an important concept that needs to be integrated by the leaders of any organization meant to thrive (Chader, 2020). In the hierarchy of a school's organization, principals are at the top. They have an undoubtedly significant impact on every aspect of their schools, including the school culture and climate, teachers' well-being and retention, and student academic achievement (Mahfouz et al., 2019; Solomon et al., 2018).

A study of 40 principals and 200 teachers in Sri Lanka revealed that principals' emotional intelligence significantly influences teachers' job satisfaction. (Kappagoda, 2011). The same conclusion was drawn in a study involving 3299 principals and 15258 teachers (Hamilton et al., 2019).

However, research in America and around the globe show that the role of principals is becoming increasingly complex with the growing array of responsibilities related to setting goals, clear measurement of progress, strategic management of school resources, collaboration with external partners... (Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, 2012; Fullan, 2002; Solomon et al., 2018, Pont et al, 2008). Also, today's educational environment is littered with growing social inequality, violence, bullying, and aggression (Brown, 2018; Jonson et al., 2018).

These various challenges that principals constantly face coupled with other high accountability issues, put them under stress that they must handle to create a safe and well-structured school environment where students blossom and grow in all dimensions. Unfortunately, they themselves lack the proper leadership and adequate resources to develop their very own social and emotional competencies. (SEC) (Beisser et al., 2014; Rangel, 2018). The analysis of 36 empirical studies found that a large majority of principals admit their lack of required management skills and report significant financial and operational burdens.

There is a gradual and widespread loss of desire for the position. In the United States, for instance, many school districts are experiencing increasing difficulty in finding and recruiting new principals (Howley et al., 2005), which means that even American schools are facing a leadership crisis. Principals work an enormous 60 hours a week. They need to sleep and spend time with their families for personal fulfillment. The more exhausted principals are the less satisfied they feel towards their jobs and are therefore more likely to quit (Mahfouz et al., 2019). Studies have shown that principals who are able to manage their emotions and who have developed the behaviors of interacting with others are able to better manage school crises.

Principals themselves are, however, becoming increasingly aware of the importance of SEL in schools (Mahfouz et al., 2019). A recent study conducted in the United States of America shows that 90% of principals are aware of the priority of SEL for educational success (Hamilton et al., 2019).

Not only is fostering principals' SEC beneficial for themselves but also for all stakeholders in education. Mahfouz (2020) identifies five ways in which such actions are key. First, training principals to improve

their SEC directly impacts their well-being, their ability to deal with intense emotional stress in an effective and timely way. Second, they make principals good leaders and guide them towards developing healthy relationships, thereby creating a school's culture that leads to positive social, emotional, and academic performance. Next, these principals' SEC training develops their abilities to establish strong and productive collaborative relationships with families and the broader community. Last, principals that are actively participating in SEC training are more likely to properly conduct SEL programs in their schools for the obvious reason that they embody the principles of SEL.

The need to train school principals, accompany them in the development of SEL competencies and the implementation of SEL programs is therefore critical and pressing.

### **5. Mahfouz's conceptual model for improving SEC in principals**

Mahfouz and Gordon (2021) suggested several action steps that can be part of a structured plan to assist school leaders in cultivating the SECs.

#### **Formalize self-care and promote a culture of self-care**

To be able to work and function at their peak, principals need to take care of themselves first. They can only give what they have. Therefore, proactive self-care needs to be normalized in schools at the administrative level. Following this logic, schools' cultures must integrate activities that maintain the mental and physical health of principals. Edge et al. (2016) showed that principals with a proactive style with respect to their own well-being can effectively sustain their demanding and challenging profession.

#### **Organize SEL-oriented professional development programs for principals and their staff.**

For principals' professional development programs to be successful, they must be ongoing, as they are better able to develop their own social-emotional competencies and effectively implement other SEL-related programs in their schools. (Mahfouz 2020). Mindfulness-based professional development programs, or Emotional Intelligence competencies programs for principals (Patti et al., 2015) are potential paths that need to be documented and explored from a scientific point of view.

#### **Coaching or mentoring models**

Whether in education or even in other fields, peer-to-peer networks or mentoring programs are beneficial for leaders. (Ma, 2018). Therefore, the installation of such networks would serve, not only as a great support for principals but also have an impact on the successful implementation of SEL programs in their schools.

#### **Supporting policies to principals SEC**

All stakeholders, especially at the policy-making level, need to support school leaders to correctly implement SEL programs. To this end, they should integrate SEL (and therefore the development of principals' SEC) into their strategic plans, budgets, and curricula, and work to formalize SEL standards.

#### **Create greater stability by assigning principals for long term periods**

There is evidence supporting that principal's turnover after short term periods has a negative impact on the entire school community (Snodgrass, 2018). For instance, studies have shown that principal turnover lowers the students' achievements and increases teacher turnover (Miller, 2013; Snodgrass, 2018; Bartanen et al., 2019). Therefore, creating more stability in principals' assignments is likely to foster satisfying and caring relationships between teachers and their students as well as with the rest of the school community.

### **6. Conclusion**

The complexities in our educational systems combined with the dynamics generated by the COVID-19 crisis have created an unprecedented need for highly effective principals operating at their peak. However, research shows that they do not have the tools and the competencies to manage the increasing levels of stress that they experience daily when doing their job (Beisser et al., 2014; Rangel, 2018). Therefore, there is a critical need to design training programs that will allow them to recognize and better manage their own emotions, thereby transforming their schools into places where students blossom and thrive both academically and personally.

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