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Suggested Citation: Kim, G. (2022). “Culturally Sustaining Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Frameworks and Approaches.” (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.
Culturally Sustaining Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Frameworks and Approaches

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April 19, 2022
Abstract

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Keywords: social-emotional learning, culturally sustaining pedagogy, history of SEL, United States versus Chinese education
Acknowledgments

In my capstone, I argue that it truly takes a village to socially and emotionally develop a student. Similarly, my capstone project would not be possible without the help of my own village. I am eternally grateful for the endless hours and encouragement that my advisors, Carla Horwitz and Melissa Scheve, have provided me and my instructor, Talya Zemach-Bersin for supporting and encouraging me to push the boundaries of my capstone project to address multiple issues within SEL in varying formats.

I want to express special thanks to Dr. James Comer for taking the time to discuss one-on-one with me how the School Development Program was born out of a need to address students' social and emotional development and how we can begin to shift towards an education model in which we empower communities to have a stake in developmentally appropriate education for the children in their communities. I also appreciate Dr. Najwa Mayer and Dr. Maria Gendron for challenging me to think outside of the norms of western notions of academia and meaningfully engage with concepts of collectivism and cultural diversity both structurally and culturally.

I am also grateful for the friends and family that have endlessly been my cheerleaders throughout this whole process. I am thankful for my Education Studies cohort, both the 2021 cohort I was originally a part of when this project was first ideated and the 2022 cohort that welcomed me, for workshopping my ideas, and my friends and family who attended my Benjamin Franklin Mellon Forum on this capstone project for helping me identify future areas of research. Last but not least, thank you to my family for supporting me throughout my five-year journey at Yale and encouraging me to pursue my truest passions.

Disclaimer

This capstone is a product of research conducted by a single individual over the period from September 2021 to May 2022. Writing about a field as ever quickly changing as SEL during a unique pandemic/post-pandemic time where exciting innovations, improvements, and findings are published daily is challenging, and leads to a capstone that is most likely to quickly become outdated. However, I hope that this capstone serves as a snapshot of this moment in time, where current education leaders, politicians, etc. can use this research to push SEL towards a more culturally sustaining future and future researchers can use this capstone as a reference to the intentions and state of SEL in 2021-2022.
Part I: Development of Social Emotional Learning in the US Versus China

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, I worked remotely with an edtech startup, Bansho, to develop Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lesson plans that helped children develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship, and responsible decision-making skills. These plans were motivated by the consensus that SEL curricula had proven short-term and long-term benefits for all students. However, the more I read about research findings in the SEL field, the more I found that these research methods only studied the impact of SEL curricula on a limited demographic of students, most often concerning White, Latine, and Black children in the United States. As a Korean/American student that grew up in both the US and Chinese education systems, I recalled how some of the social norms and emotional skills I learned while attending US schools did not hold up within my Asian culture. For instance, my school taught me that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” but my Asian culture stressed that “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” I could not fit myself into the limited demographic categories of existing research and wondered if their listed benefits of SEL programming would still hold if they developed SEL curricula for Asian students, like myself.

1 On the surface, Latine (used here) and Latinx (which is the term more often used recently in higher education and academic settings) may strike readers as synonyms. Both terms are designed to be more inclusive than their gendered parents, “Latino” and “Latina,” specifically in reference to nonbinary people. I chose to use “Latine” here because it is inclusive and considers the linguistic culture of the group it represents in a way “Latinx” never could, mostly because it was designed to work with the Spanish language: “Latine” can be pronounced and conjugated in Spanish, while “Latinx” cannot (Kamara, 2021)

2 “The space in and between “Asian” [in this case “Korean”] and “American” has always been a contentious one with multiple meanings delineated by a hyphen, a blank space, and a slash. If the hyphen (e.g. “Korean-American”) connotes an otherness of the “forever foreigner,” the blank space (e.g. “Korean American”) emphasizes a citizenship claim that turns “Asian” [or “Korean”] into an adjective, which is a kind of corrective from a sense that the forever foreigner cannot be fully citizen or fully American” (Lim, 2020).

I chose to use the slash because it turns the US-centric sentiment on its head by pointing to the transnational, diasporic, and decolonial cultural meshings that makes this disambiguation impossible.

3 Many examples of these types of educational cultural differences in practice are illustrated in Lenora Chu’s “Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve,” where she details her experience raising a Chinese/American child in both China and the United States. Through recounting her experience sending her child to a Shanghai school, she illustrates how “[in] America, a student might be rewarded for extraordinary effort or performance, for rising a head above the rest [while in] China, you get a star for blending in and doing as you’re told” (Chu, 2017, pg. 3)
Because of the culturally conflicting lessons I learned growing up, I was curious to investigate how we should approach developing social and emotional competencies for students from different cultural backgrounds, especially East-Asian students. This part of the capstone project undergoes this investigation by using a case study of China, specifically comparing and contrasting the development of SEL in China with that of the US, to better understand how cultural context should inform the development of SEL curricula in East-Asian contexts. On a larger scale, this capstone project serves as an initial step in understanding how we can develop culturally-sustaining SEL curricula for students around the world that are not White, Black, or Latine, as historically tailored for in the United States.

Social Emotional Learning is now a global phenomenon that has captured the interest of teachers, parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers (Collie et al, 2017) beyond the United States. While this interest is in part due to the growing number of research studies in the past few decades that show how well-implemented SEL curricula are correlated with short-term and long-term benefits in student behavior, mental health, and academic performance, the current COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously introduced new stressors and removed comforting connections and routines in the lives of students around the world (Rosanbalm, 2021), further driving the proliferation of SEL curricula globally. As educators, researchers, and policymakers around the world are starting to implement SEL curricula to ease potential detrimental impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had (and continues to have) on students’ social and emotional well-being, this project urges them to consider how the local culture they are serving should shape how they develop culturally sustaining SEL curricula in the future. Before we implement a curriculum that is based mostly on U.S. research and scholarship, we should examine what SEL standards also look like in countries vastly different from the US (like China) and see if the same benefits of SEL hold. Without this due diligence, all stakeholders may be otherwise wasting their time, energy, and resources in developing curricula that might have little or no effect in non-U.S. countries.

**Background Research**

**What Does It Mean to Develop Culturally Sustaining SEL Curricula?**

For decades, scholars have critiqued (and continue to critique) the ways in which traditional pedagogical practices uphold white, western ideologies and traditions. Evolved from the Black community during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the multicultural education movement in the 1980s and 1990s was a popular early approach that sought to make

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4 Such as an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement (Durlak et al, 2011) or significantly fewer symptoms of mental health disorders and being more likely to be at or above the median in socioeconomic status by age 27 (Hawkins et al, 2008).

See Durlak et al (2011) for a more comprehensive list of short-term and long-term benefits.

Also, see Part II for a further evaluation of popularly claimed “research-backed” benefits of SEL.
space for the cultures of diverse student bodies (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). In the multicultural tradition, education should be equitable for all students regardless of culture, where “culture” is defined in the broadest sense of the word, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). While multicultural education strove to remove barriers to educational opportunities and success for students from different cultural backgrounds, it was largely critiqued for emphasizing an individual student’s mobility (Sleeter, 1995) and focusing too heavily on an individual classroom teacher as the agent of school and education reform (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). This continued to center on protecting whiteness as the norm, to ignore systemic and institutional barriers, and to require the assimilation of different ethnic and cultural groups to the existing laws and values of a singular national identity (Malik, 2015). Shifting away from multiculturalism contributed to a “new body of critical sociocultural criticism of educational institutions within the context of larger societal and global dimensions of power, privilege, and economics” and their intersections (Ed Change), calling for “decision-making power in education away from dominant groups and towards oppressed groups” (Sleeter, 1995).

A pivotal moment away from multicultural education occurred when Gloria Ladson-Billings published “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” in 1995. She challenged “notions about the intersection of culture and teaching that rely solely on microanalytic or macroanalytic perspectives” (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and theorized how to “make teaching and learning relevant and responsive to the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students across categories of difference and (in)equality” (Paris, 2012), especially for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) students. This type of Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) built upon decades of scholarship that addressed the whole child, in other words, the interplay between a student’s social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development in their physical and mental well being (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018) and is still very much prevalent in education and popular media today.

CRP, however, has been increasingly criticized within the past decade for centering around cultural competencies, rather than structural competencies. While cultural competencies mainly focus on identifying bias between educators and students, structural competencies emphasize the economic, social, and political conditions that produce the social inequalities in education in the first place. Thus, structural competencies can be used as a social-justice-centered framework that recognizes how institutions, like schools, can serve a role in students’ whole well-being. For instance, prominent critiques of CRP, namely Paris (2012)’s

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5 See “What Does It Mean to Be a BIPOC Student?” by Best Colleges (2021) for more information on what it means to be a BIPOC student and how the BIPOC term has evolved over time.

6 The origins of discourse surrounding “cultural competencies” versus “structural competencies” come from Metzl (2014)’s framework for conceptualizing and addressing health-related social justice issues. My use of these terms apply beyond the field of health and medicine into the field of schooling and education.
“Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice” question if CRP goes far enough in incorporating and/or acknowledging cultural practices of communities marginalized by systemic inequalities. By using a Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) framework, researchers like Paris call for a schooling and education system that seeks to perpetuate and foster (i.e. to sustain) cultural diversity and pluralism to ensure the valuing and maintenance of a multiethic and multilingual society centered around structural, not cultural competencies.

Currently in the SEL field, there is a strong movement calling for anti-racist SEL approaches. An inspirational leader in this field is Dr. Dena Simmons, a distinguished researcher of Social-Emotional Learning who resigned from Yale University’s Center for Emotional Intelligence in January 2021 after experiencing “a pattern of behavior by some colleagues that left her feeling ‘tokenized, undermined and bullied’” (Young, 2021). Dr. Simmons spent nearly a decade striving to make the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence’s RULER program more anti-racist. Now, she leads her own efforts to incorporate equity into SEL and urges educators and researchers to critically think about how SEL research, practice, and policy can serve to help students “confront injustice, hate, and inequity” (Simmons, 2019). Anti-racist SEL approaches involves “taking stock of and eradicating policies that are racist [and] have racist outcomes [towards] making sure that ultimately, we’re working towards a much more egalitarian, emancipatory society” (North, 2020).

While this capstone project draws inspiration from and aims to further the mission of antiracist approaches, I refrain from explicitly calling for an “antiracist” SEL curricula and instead urge for a “culturally sustaining” SEL curricula in order to not falsely co-opt the antiracist, abolitionism-centered U.S. lens for transnational purposes. Because theories and practice of anti-racism are rooted in the US Civil Rights Movement and a fight for abolition on behalf of specifically BIPOC and Latine communities from systems of white supremacy, it does not address the transnational, diasporic, and decolonial cultural meshings of the multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic backgrounds of Asian students (e.g. Korean/American students like myself) and communities (e.g. Chinese schools and their students) that this capstone is concerned with.

All of these different approaches towards education all build upon each other in decades of scholarship, research, advocacy, and experience in striving to create a schooling and education system that seeks to perpetuate and foster (i.e. to sustain) cultural diversity and pluralism. Similarly, my capstone project incorporates this underlying need to address the whole child, drawing from traditions of multicultural, culturally relevant/responsive, culturally sustaining, anti-racist education to illustrate what “Culturally Sustaining SEL Curricula” looks like.

For the ease of communication, when I use “culturally sustaining” throughout this capstone project, it will indicate a type of education that is:

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See Part II for further discussion on the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence’s RULER program.
1) Multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic
2) Focused on systemic, not cultural competencies
3) Shifting power towards local stakeholders, including but not limited to parents, teachers, principals, community leaders, and students.

This approach does not categorize students in singular homogenous groupings and avoids stereotyping students in sweeping generalizations. Instead, it addresses the cultures surrounding a whole child in the broadest sense of the word (including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, language) and how they interplay with one another within a students’ local context to actively form and reinforce a culturally sustaining education.

What is Social Emotional Learning?

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is “is an integral part of education and human development” and “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2021d). As the leading multidisciplinary network of researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates across the United States in the SEL field, CASEL promotes an SEL framework that is widely accepted and adopted throughout the SEL field. CASEL’s framework, which breaks down SEL into five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that support learning and development (CASEL, 2021d) is as follows:

1. **Self-awareness** - ability to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts
2. **Self-management** - ability to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations
3. **Social awareness** - ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts

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8 CASEL’s definition of SEL was most recently changed in October 2020. This is the first half of the new definition. The second half, which further emphasizes equity, identity, and social justice is not pertinent to specific competencies and curricula standards that we are concerned about in Part I, but will be further discussed in Part II.

9 While the CASEL framework is the most widely known framework in the field of SEL, there exists a multitude of other SEL frameworks, both within and beyond the United States. See The Taxonomy Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, specifically the resultant Explore SEL Project (2017), for an organized list comparing and contrasting a select number of different frameworks and terms used to describe different SEL competencies across various organizations.
4. **Relationship skills** - ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups
5. **Responsible decision making** - ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations

This general framework is not exclusive to the United States and can be seen in other western nation states. In the UK, the Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) framework, established by the UK Department for Children Schools, and Families (DCSF) (Now known as the Department for Education - DFE) in 2010 similarly aimed to have “a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and wellbeing of all who learn and work in schools” (DCSF, 2004, as cited in Humphrey et al, 2010). This framework has the same five components derived from the five domains of Goleman’s (1995) model of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation (self-management), motivation (responsible decision making), empathy (social awareness), and social skills (relationship skills) (as cited in Humphrey et al, 2010).

Starting in the early 2010s, we also see variations of this SEL framework start to be adopted in China. Soon after the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2009 got passed in the United States Congress (CASEL, 2021a), the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China partnered with the Chinese branch of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in 2011 and officially introduced SEL to the Chinese education system in 2012 (Yu & Jiang, 2019). At the UNICEF meeting convened at Beijing Normal University, Chinese scholars collaboratively developed a six-dimensional SEL framework that addressed China’s focus on collectivist education (Yu & Jiang, 2017). According to Yu & Jiang (2017), they are comprised of the following:

1. **Self-cognition** - knowing about and reflecting on one’s own feelings
2. **Self-management** - adjusting one’s own emotion to assist with tasks at hand
3. **Cognition of others** - understanding others’ feelings and perspectives
4. **Management of others** - dealing with emotional issues in interpersonal relationships
5. **Cognition of the collective** - understanding the rules, norms, and values of the collective and its perspective
6. **Management of the collective** - building a sense of belonging to the collective

While the US CASEL framework has group-oriented elements in social cognition and self-management competencies, the Chinese UNICEF framework more explicitly centers around the “collective” in its last two competencies “cognition of the collective” and “management of the collective.”
Figure 1
Comparison of US and Chinese SEL Competencies

Note. This figure compares SEL competencies in the CASEL framework from the United States with the MOE-UNICEF framework in China. The arrows map related competencies with each other, with a lack of an arrow in the last pairing to highlight a difference in these competencies.

The first four competencies in both the US and Chinese frameworks are largely similar to each other and map onto each other in the same order (See Figure 1). “Self-awareness” and “self-cognition” both focus on understanding one’s own feelings. “Self-management” exists in each framework with almost identical definitions. “Social awareness” and “cognition of others” deal with understanding other people’s feelings and perspectives. And lastly, “relationship skills” and “management of others” both cover interpersonal relationships. However, in the remaining competencies, we can more clearly see how the Chinese framework deviates from the US framework. While the remaining US competency of “responsible decision making” focuses on an individual’s ability to make caring and constructive choices about their own personal behavior and social interactions, the remaining Chinese competencies explicitly state the “collective” and focus on how one understands and belongs within the rules, norms, and values of a collective group.

Collectivism vs Individualism

The “collective” or collectivism is a type of “social organization in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity, such as a state, a nation, a race, or a social class” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998). In collectivist cultures, most people’s social behaviors are largely determined by goals, attitudes, and values that are shared with some group of people (Triandis, 1998). Often, collectivism is contrasted with individualism or individualist cultures, in which most people’s social behaviors are largely determined by personal goals, attitudes, and values.
China is a highly collectivist culture, where its society places value on people acting in the interests of the group and not necessarily of themselves (Hofstede, 2021). On the other side of the spectrum, the United States has one of the most individualistic cultures in the world, where its society places value on each individual fending for themselves (Hofstede, 2021). Quantitatively on the Hofstede Individualism scale, which measures to what extent that a culture places importance on attaining personal goals (i.e. is individualistic, measured from 1 - *most collectivist* to 120 - *most individualistic*), the United States has a score of 91, and China has a score of 20 (Hofstede, 2021), putting them on opposite sides of the collectivist-individualist spectrum.

While in the previous section I have pointed out how the US and Chinese SEL frameworks deviate from each other in terms of valuing the individual over the collective (and vice versa) in their last differing competencies, it is important to note that humanist traditions of ethnic studies have largely rejected a simple collectivist-individualist paradigm. In practice, most cultures have elements of both individualism and collectivism — these categories are not mutually exclusive. Historically, these categories have emerged from older anthropological and psychological traditions that ascribe things to only culture rather than to the historical backdrop that shapes these tendencies (Dr. Najwa Mayer, personal communication, 2021, Dec 2). Accounting and adjusting for this origin, Chinese collectivistic values should not be ascribed to culture alone and instead should be described within the larger context of its recent history\(^{10}\). From this lens, we can better understand that Chinese cultures are not collectivist according to (western) observations of Chinese peoples and their practices; rather their recent communist history and systems, in which collectivism is carried to its furthest extreme with a minimum of private ownership and a maximum of a planned economy (Britannica, 1998), bear collectivist behaviors (Dr. Najwa Mayer, personal communication, 2021, Dec 2) that differs from the United States. In the context of this project, I use the categories of “individualism” and “collectivism” to show contrast across two different nation-states: the United States and China.

\(^{10}\) Detailing the different economic, social, political, and cultural factors within the larger context of recent Chinese history is outside of the scope of this paper. Here, I defer to other scholars who have documented different aspects of such histories to shed light on how Chinese culture bears collectivistic characteristics:

See Gong et al (2021) for a further elaboration of how climate, economic, and migrational changes over time have influenced Chinese people to solve problems through existing social organizations, where mutual dependence in interpersonal relations reproduced the social basis of a collectivist culture (where the interests and goals of the individual are subordinate to the goals of the family and lineage).

Also, see Hays (2021) for a summary of how land and agriculture reforms in China from mid- to late- 1900s fostered a dependence on communes, cooperatives, and collectives for survival.
Centralized vs Decentralized

Beyond collectivism and individualism, centralization and decentralization is also an important factor to consider because these two different approaches affect the effectiveness of schools in educating the children of a nation by placing authority and resources with a specific subset of the education system. In a centralized education system, the authority of education is held in a central body, not a local community. This central body has complete power over all aspects of both developing (such as through resource management, e.g. money, information, people, technology) and implementing (e.g. deciding the content) a curriculum (Brennen, 2002). According to Huang et al (2016), China has a centralized education system in that the central government sets national goals and standards for outcomes. In practice, this could mean that regardless of regional differences in language, culture, or history, all Chinese students have to learn the same curriculum in all subjects using the same Mandarin language. While a bit of decentralization occurs in China where the responsibilities of implementing the national goals and standards are local provincial duties, the authority for enacting educational legislation and regulations still remains on the central national government level (Huang et al, 2016). Additionally, lower-level duties are often re-centralized in China in order to strengthen central power, making China have a centralized education system overall (Huang et al, 2016).

A decentralized education system, on the other hand, refers to when educational authority has been passed down to a more local, non-national context (e.g. state, district, school). The United States has a decentralized education system based upon the federal Constitution, which gives educational authority to the states and local authorities, as well as to individual schools and higher education institutions (USNEI, 2008). This means that across the United States, you could see curricula vastly different from one place to the next, all depending on the local infrastructures that determine what educational standards apply to a particular student of a particular school district, region, or state.

Literature Review

While I cannot comprehensively track the progression of all SEL programs in every country around the world\textsuperscript{11}, SEL seems to have generally emerged and become trending at around the same time period (early-mid 2010s) on a global scale, as a reaction to local, national, and transnational developments and problems. Because of the current pandemic situation, this already-present growth is starting to and will continue to exponentially increase. With the Global SEL Market expected to reach a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 24.7\% post-pandemic

\textsuperscript{11} See Frydenberg et al (2017), which gathers studies conducted in select areas of Australia and the Asia Pacific, for an example of what a large-scale comprehensive project documenting SEL developments and implementations across countries could look like.
(2021-2026), there seems to be a strong economic motivator for countries to currently invest increasingly more into SEL (Mordor Intelligence Analysis Sample, 2021).

Additionally, the approach and pedagogy behind the SEL curriculum seem to differ by culture as they are being implemented around the globe. While western SEL pedagogy centers around students’ individual social and emotional growth, eastern SEL pedagogy focuses on collective. For instance, while in the United States, the term “citizenship” in regards to students’ values typically refers to students’ individual sense of “responsibility, compassion, honesty, integrity, and tolerance” (Planbook, 2020), the term “citizenship” in collectivist China refers to a student’s “virtues and morality” with the ultimate goal that they serve the larger group and “choose to become engaged citizens” (UNICEF China, 2020), measuring students’ “readiness to serve the nation and its people” (Yu & Jiang, 2017, in Frydenberg et al, 2017) rather than themselves. With this project, I hope to examine these types of similarities and differences (e.g. valuing “citizenship” yet defining “citizenship” differently in individualistic or collectivistic terms) in the development of SEL curricula in the global west and global east.

While the demand for SEL is growing globally, much of what we know about how to develop SEL curricula is not so global. A bulk of the research in the field of SEL comes from studies conducted in and/or centered around the US, which has a uniquely decentralized and individualistic approach to SEL. The extent to which a country is centralized or decentralized in its SEL approaches seems to have a significant impact on SEL research development. For instance, due to different regional policies on education and SEL within the US, many different regional SEL programs have emerged concurrently. To justify why their program is superior to others, they have had to publish a multitude of separate studies that as a whole, make up a majority of SEL literature (Humphrey, 2013, as cited throughout Frydenberg et al, 2017). In countries where SEL approaches are centralized (see the case of Australia in Frydenberg et al, 2017), there is more flexibility in how SEL standards are developed because centralized standards need to encompass a larger, more diverse demographic with more diverse backgrounds and needs, which contrasts an often more specific, rigid approach that the US has with its decentralized standards that targets a more specific subset of the population and supports local, not national, priorities.

Furthermore, the extent to which a country is individualistic or collectivist may also impact what values, skills, and competencies are prioritized when implementing the developed SEL curricula. For example, competencies that center around the self (i.e. self-awareness and self-management) might be prioritized more in individualistic cultures, while competencies that center around group dynamics (i.e. social awareness and relationship skills) might instead be prioritized more in collectivist cultures (Hecht and Shin, 2015, as cited in Collie et al, 2017). How SEL curricula are taught (e.g. in individual activities versus group settings) might also be...
influenced by the extent to which the target culture is individualistic or collectivist (Hecht and Shin, 2015, as cited in Collie et al, 2017).

**Figure 2**

*The US versus China on Key Structural and Cultural Variables*

While a handful of researchers have looked at the impact of centralized efforts in developing SEL curricula in individualistic countries (like Australia: see studies under Part 1 of Frydenberg et al, 2017) and others have looked at the impact of decentralized efforts in developing SEL curricula in collectivist countries (such as the case of Hong Kong by Wu & Mok, 2017) (both cases represented by the gray boxes in Figure 2), not much research has highlighted the development of SEL curricula in both centralized and collectivist contexts. This research aims to fill this gap by using China as a case study to explore how the centralized and collectivist approach compares to the decentralized and individualistic approach to SEL development. Before we widely implement SEL curricula worldwide during and after this COVID-19 pandemic, we should examine what SEL development has looked like in countries vastly different from the US, like in China, and see to what extent SEL approaches and benefits are universal.

*SEL Development in the US*

Humphrey (2013) (as cited throughout Frydenberg et al, 2017) argues that due to different regional policies on education and SEL within the United States, many different
regional SEL programs have emerged concurrently. In an effort to justify why their program is superior to others, organizations and groups within the US have had to publish a multitude of separate studies that as a whole, make up a majority of SEL literature. The more specific, rigid approach that the US has in researching SEL program effectiveness is because these programs have historically been targeting a more specific subset of the population, supporting local, not national, priorities.

The modern origins of SEL highlight this focus on local priorities. SEL can be traced back to the late 1960s, when Dr. James Comer, a Yale professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale's Child Study Center, began piloting the Comer School Development Program, based on “his speculation that ‘the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and that this, in turn, shapes academic achievement’” (Edutopia, 2011). His program went on to focus on two poor, low-achieving, predominately African-American elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut, that had the worst attendance and the lowest academic achievement in the city, tailoring changes to these schools’ academics, social programs, and school procedures to eventually see the academic performance at the two schools exceeded the national average and truancy and behavior problems decline by the early 1980s (Edutopia, 2011). Decades of SEL development in this context have shaped current-day SEL-related research and literature to focus on differences in SEL approaches for and outcomes between White and BIPOC students.

This decentralized focus is further supported by the U.S. Constitution, which establishes a legal framework for state standards, not national standards, to determine what SEL looks like in each state in the United States. This is why as of April 2021, while every state has comprehensive, free-standing standards for SEL with developmental benchmarks in preschool, only eight of fifty states have standards for SEL development regarding early elementary students and only eight more expand their standards to K-12 grades (Wallace, 2021).

**SEL Development in China**

Unlike research on the development of SEL in the United States, not much research has been done on SEL development in China. One study that has focused on SEL development in China is Yu & Jiang (2017), which outlines some effects that China’s focus on collectivism has generally had on Chinese SEL curricula. Yu & Jiang (2017) have analyzed the development of SEL in China in an isolated context, failing to discuss how it compares to other SEL curricula around the world and failing to look into how transnational influences have impacted the development of SEL curricula in China. Yu & Jiang (2017) also point out the need for research into how these standards align with other SEL frameworks like CASEL (2003) and how China adapts and refines these standards to accommodate the cultural roots and values that render the UNICEF standards distinctly Chinese. This research project aims to put the Chinese SEL development in context to address this need.
**Scope of Research & Research Question**

Doing a comprehensive research project on the development of SEL standards in every country is out of the scope of a year-long capstone project. Similarly, because implementing SEL across a nationwide scale involves so many stakeholders and organizations, comprehensively tracking the development of SEL in all of the US and China would not be feasible. Instead, my research aims to answer the following question: **How does the development of SEL programming by the Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF in China compare with the development of SEL programming by CASEL in the US?**

I chose to do a case study on China because SEL programming in China developed at around the same time period on a similar size and scale as the codification of SEL programming on a national scale in the United States. Also, China, with both collectivist culture and centralized SEL standards, is the ideal candidate for a country completely opposite to the United States’ individualistic and decentralized approach to SEL. Because most prior research in the field of SEL has been done in the United States by CASEL, I wanted to find a similar large-scale non-profit organization that is a leading influence in the development of SEL in China in terms of research, advertising, and policy-making. UNICEF fits all these prerequisites, allowing us to better compare and contrast SEL development in China and the US during a similar historical time period and historical context by organizations with similar sized and impactful organizations.

**Methodology**

I conducted a literature review, synthesizing primary and secondary sources around the development of SEL curricula and standards by CASEL in the context of the US and placed them in dialogue with primary and secondary sources around the development of SEL curricula and standards by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education in the context of China. I looked at national SEL standards that were developed in the US and in China to see in which way they have been decentralized (e.g. different states or regions having vastly different standards based on local priorities) or centralized (e.g. federal level uniform standards) in the US and China respectively. I also analyzed how individualistic or collectivist values inform the ways in which SEL standards have been implemented.

Because I am not doing an experimental study, it would be impossible for me to find the causal effect between how the two variables (decentralization and individualistic/collectivist) change the outcomes (benefits or detriments) of these students. However, I could look at the perceived potential benefits and detriments of SEL of each party and how they correlate with decentralization and individualistic/collectivist ideals. In other words, **what does China’s Ministry of Education and UNICEF imply or state as reasons for or potential benefits of developing SEL curricula, and how is this approach similar to or differ from what the US Department of Education and CASEL imply or state as reasons for or potential benefits of developing SEL curricula?** Because there is not as much literature about the development of
SEL in China in English, I translated primary sources, specifically Chinese documents, media, and publications about the development of SEL that have been overlooked or mistranslated by western researchers/scholars. UNICEF in China particularly has a lot of policy documents that start off with an English translation but proceed to present results in Chinese. By combing through documents like these, I hope to incorporate new information into the SEL literature that western scholars have previously ignored.

From this project, I hope to communicate a more nuanced understanding of how culture could inform the ways in which SEL curricula are developed around the world. The SEL field has a lot to gain in expanding scholarship beyond the U.S.-centered (or more generally western) research and scholarship being primarily done by a few researchers affiliated with CASEL. As the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated an already growing global interest in developing SEL curricula, this is a critical time to examine what SEL implementation looks like in countries vastly different from the US and see to what extent SEL curricula should be replicable or need to be adjusted based on local contexts in non-U.S. countries.

**Results**

**SEL National Standards**

Based on the national SEL standards of each respective country, China indeed has a centralized and collectivistic approach in the development of its national SEL standards while the United States instead has a decentralized and individualistic approach to its own national SEL standards. Neither is right nor wrong in their approach. Instead, these differences reflect how each countries' penchant for individualism/collectivism and de/centralization informs the most successful way that national SEL standards have been developed in each countries’ respective structural and cultural context.

In China, the MOE-UNICEF China partnership had produced seven different manuals that collectively form a centralized SEL curriculum that was developed at the national level and disseminated throughout the entire nation, rather than leaving each province to develop and/or implement these standards on their own. These seven manuals include a training manual with supplementary materials, a manual for principals and teachers, curricula books for grades 1 through 5, and a manual each on school climate and family activities. Collectively, they are referred to by UNICEF China as “The Series of Resources for the MOE-UNICEF Social and Emotional Learning Project” and are written in Chinese, with an explicit target audience of policymakers, principals, school administrators, teachers, parents, and guardians within China. By explicitly including all stakeholders, including those involved outside of the immediate school campus and classroom, these national manuals encourage the collective “village” surrounding the child to be involved in carrying out national SEL standard curricula.

On the other hand, the United States SEL standards come from three congressional acts — namely the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021 — rather than
a set of specifically outlined curriculum manuals. While these standards “support evidence-based social and emotional learning programming” (112th Congress, 2011) through encouraging schools to develop SEL programming and providing potential funding routes for these efforts, the onus still largely remains on the policymakers within separate states and districts to develop and implement SEL standards and programs on their own.

In the United States, the first instance of national recognition of Social Emotional Learning was in 2011, when the Academic, Social and Emotional Learning Act was passed. This name may sound familiar because the Collaborative for this type of Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (i.e. CASEL) was the primary lobbying force and provider of evidence for implementing more SEL programming (CASEL, 2021a). In this bill, SEL programming “refers to classroom instruction and schoolwide activities and initiatives” (112th Congress, 2011). Notably absent from this act is the lack of stakeholders outside of the school, such as parents and guardians or policymakers on any level, in ensuring that students receive this SEL programming. While for both cases, non-governmental organizations were heavily involved in developing national SEL standards, the government (i.e. the Ministry of Education) went to the non-profit (i.e. UNICEF) for SEL development in China while the opposite occurred in the United States: the non-profit (i.e. CASEL) went to the government (i.e. Congress) for SEL development.

The ways in which different types of entities (governmental bodies, non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, for-profit companies, etc.) interact when developing SEL curricula are notable because of the different abilities and limitations that each entity has in centralized versus decentralized education systems. In China, where there is a strong centralized authority for its education system, centralized entities (like national governmental bodies or larger non-governmental organizations with governmental support) are more likely to be successful in developing and scaling out SEL standards and programming than decentralized entities (like for-profit companies or US-based non-profit organizations). Particularly in current-day China, this is largely due to “double reduction” policies that took effect starting in August 2021, where the government prohibited for-profit companies from being publicly listed and limited these businesses from operating outside of a limited number of hours on non-holiday weekdays, thus forcing education companies to pivot to another industry (such as becoming a non-profit) or be completely shut down (Ye, 2021). These limitations have since forced the closure of 92% of educational companies in China, from about 124,000 to 9,728 standing companies (as of March 2022; Feng, 2022) and have made it difficult for existing for-profit companies to initiate SEL programs and partnerships because of the new limitations that the centralized authority poses on educational companies. This centralization prevents the type of lobbying and grassroots SEL developments that have been successful in the United States from being implemented in China.

The tendency to veer away from centralization towards decentralization in the United States can be traced back to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which “scaled up the federal role in holding students accountable for student outcomes” in the United States (Klein, 2015). Under this law, states were required to raise all students up to the “proficient
level” on state tests by 2013-2014, although each state got to decide individually what “proficiency” should look like and which tests to use. The No Child Left Behind Act has been heavily criticized for growing the federal footprint in K-12 education (Klein, 2015) and was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, which gave less power to national entities and more power to states and districts in creating their own school improvement plans, including social and emotional growth, and authorized a primary funding source for social and emotional efforts (CASEL, 2021a). Because the less centralized ESSA approach was more successful in the United States than its previously more centralized NCLB approach, it does not mean that SEL curricula should be implemented in a decentralized manner in other countries. In countries with centralized education systems, like China, a centralized approach instead could be more successful.

Currently, the centralized and collectivist standards developed by the MOE-UNICEF partnership are still in place today, with the SEL 10 Years in Review video published by UNICEF China stating the success of the pilot programs back in 2012 are currently being further scaled up and disseminated across the country because of its proven improvements in students’ social and emotional competencies and school climate. On the other hand, the United States still maintains a decentralized way of investing in developing SEL curricula. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, according to CASEL (2021a), “represents an unprecedented opportunity to invest in SEL” but this act does not explicitly support nor push states from a national policy level to develop and adopt SEL curricula. Instead, CASEL is urging states through their own coalitions, efforts, and proposals on how states can loosely interpret the wording of the ARP to apply for and acquire funding for SEL program development and implementation.

**Tailoring SEL Curricula to Local Cultures**

When comparing the official Chinese description of Social Emotional Learning Resources found on UNICEF China’s website and the official English introduction preface for The Series of Resources for the MOE-UNICEF Social and Emotional Learning Project, there are three key differences that hint at how China has adapted the SEL curriculum for their local context:

**First**, the official English version adds these extra sentences that are not mentioned anywhere else in the official Chinese version: “Children and young people are facing unprecedented challenges in a globalized and dynamic world, including changes in learning styles, the transition from school to work, new technologies, migration, changing labour markets, and transnational environmental changes. It is widely agreed that schools focusing only on academic instructions cannot prepare students for the fast-changing world.” This English narrative of the SEL curriculum as a solution to catch up with or get ahead of 21st-century trends implies that China is outwardly marketing that they are developing an SEL curriculum to catch up with or get ahead of these 21st-century problems. Many of these 21st-century problems, like an increased need to prepare students for changing labor markets, new technological advances,
migration, and environmental concerns, are indeed currently global issues that ubiquitously impact most developing and developed nations (including the United States).

This suggests that globalization may have created a third, more homogenous, transnational culture for which we need to adapt SEL curricula to address in a post-pandemic era of education. However, this assumption is contradicted by a further investigation into what China inwardly markets as their motivations for developing an SEL curriculum, which shows that China does not seem so concerned with using SEL to address these issues particularly. Translated from the Social and Emotional Learning Training Manual Part 1 (p. 23-25), we can more clearly see MOE-UNICEF’s motivations for developing SEL curricula in China. They state in Chinese that they want to address “the more widespread problems of excessive competition, the disappearance of concern and respect for others, simple knowledge indoctrination, a single evaluation criterion that causes frustration and the malformation of personalities, and the abnormal living environment induced by psychological naivety and vulnerability” (UNICEF China, 2020).

Second, an entire clause about the incorporation of Chinese specialties, traditions, values, etc. is completely omitted in the official English version: [translated] “the project integrates Chinese cultural and traditional values, while accounting for China’s basic education realities, to construct a theoretical framework that is rich/abundant in Chinese characteristics (i.e. distinguishing features and qualities).” Based on the Chinese description, those who developed the SEL curriculum for China did indeed adequately adjust the curricula to incorporate aspects of Chinese culture and its values. This cultural tailoring is most evident in the Chinese version of the SEL framework, which includes the Chinese cultural and traditional values of the collective in many aspects.

Third, thus, when listing out the SEL competencies, the official English translation mimics CASEL’s five key SEL competencies, but the Chinese text mentions additional competencies that more closely mimic China’s own six competencies framework. Additions, like health (in bodily and mindful terms), favorable emotions, and virtues/morality/ethics, places importance on the collective. This is evident in how the Chinese version purposely uses two distinct words to mean others, placing them in a parallel sentence structure that calls attention to how they are distinct categories in their perspective (e.g. 他人 - others vs. 集体 - collective).

With the creation of a single set of manuals to be disseminated across China, we can also see evidence of the centralization of SEL curricula development. These manuals are made and distributed by the Ministry of Education for all teachers of China with no notes in neither English nor Chinese on how they developed and/or curated the content for specific populations within China. The first manual serves to introduce the “theoretical basis of the SEL programme, describing the role of students, teachers, principals, and parents from the SEL perspective, how to implement the SEL programme at school, how to promote the social and emotional development of students with special needs, and how to monitor and evaluate the programme implementation in schools” (translated from UNICEF China).
In these sections, translated from the Social and Emotional Learning Training Manual Part 1 (p. 23-25) we can explicitly see MOE-UNICEF’s motivations for developing SEL curricula in China. It states that education in China was previously seen first and foremost as a tool for economic growth, with the purpose of educational development as a means to promote the growth of the GDP of the country. As a result, education in China at the turn of the century had been largely transformed into a profit-making model, centered on “profitable skills” with evaluation mechanisms, academic success, and promotions at its core. However, the Chinese government now believes that GDP growth can no longer be equated with the overall process of society. These quality evaluation mechanisms have previously led schools to focus only on courses related to academic success, focusing on measuring IQ-related abilities, rather than developing students' critical thinking skills to become knowledgeable, moral, and responsible citizens. Because of this approach, many students were found to have different degrees of depression, loneliness, inferiority, courage, selfishness, indifference, dishonesty, lack of self-confidence, and other psychological barriers.

These manuals also list some domestic incidents that led up to the need for developing SEL curricula in China, including but not limited to:

- Tsinghua University students' acid attack on bears, referring to when the five bears at Beijing Zoo were injured when a Tsinghua University engineering student flung acid at them, supposedly to “test the animals' agility, which infuriated the public” (Tsinghua University, 2003)
- Yunnan University student murder of classmates, referring to when a college student murdered four classmates with a blunt metal object and was later executed for his crimes (Xinhua News Agency, 2004, as cited by China.org)
- Some teenagers drowning their classmates, referring to when a 15-year-old boy was drowning in China as his friends stood laughing and filming on the shore (Chan & Chow, 2015)

To those involved in the MOE-UNICEF partnership that collaboratively wrote these manuals, these shocking examples reveal a disregard for life, apathy, and cruelty to others, a crude impulse to deal with interpersonal relationships, ignorance exposed in the face of emergencies, extreme selfishness and unreasonable coldness, confusion and numbness to the self and the feelings of others, a lack of mental knowledge and emotional adjustment. SEL curricula are perceived to be a solution in bringing back empathy and humanity into students to fill these gaps in their social and emotional well-being. They also want to address the more widespread problems mentioned above of excessive competition, the disappearance of concern and respect for others, simple knowledge indoctrination, a single evaluation criterion that causes frustration and the malformation of personalities, and the abnormal living environment induced by
psychological naivety and vulnerability, paired with the lack of psychological counseling and treatment institutions and irrational interpersonal relationships (UNICEF China, 2020).

The Chinese government, through the writers of these manuals (i.e. MOE-UNICEF China), explicitly states that they “want a society that is not just about competition, but more importantly about cooperation.” According to this manual, social cooperation “means that the interrelationship between citizens is not the interrelationship of interests, … but more importantly, it is the mutuality constructed through our positive ideas, actions and emotions, and the spirit and action of consciously pursuing cooperation and assistance as social subjects.” They define the “society” (as underlying the “social” in “Social and Emotional Learning”) in collectivist terms, a “society emphasizes the meaning of companionship and extends to voluntary alliances formed for the common good,” emphasizing groups formed by long-term cooperative social members through the development of organizational relations, and forms institutions, countries and other organized forms.

From looking at both the United States and China on some events that lead up to their respective developments of SEL curricula throughout this first part of the project, there seem to be both proactive and reactive reasons driving each countries’ development of SEL curricula. These reactive reasons seem to depend more heavily on domestic incidents and trends. The proactive reasons seem to depend on global trends with developmental solutions that are more tailored to localized cultural specificities and needs.

**Best Practices**

Based on the ways in which the development of Chinese SEL frameworks and curricula differ from those in the United States, there seem to be some key ways in which China has tailored SEL curricula to be culturally sustaining. They can be summarized as four best practices that other countries that are not as decentralized and/or individualistic as the United States could learn from if they plan on developing culturally sustaining SEL curricula in their own countries.

1) **Create culture-specific SEL competencies.** In other words, tailoring the competencies to what is socially acceptable, valued, and/or desirable in the target culture is better than blindly transplanting the existing CASEL framework that is based on US-specific needs. The CASEL framework may be a good starting point but is not the end-all-be-all solution in creating a framework for SEL competencies.

2) **Use centralized entities for centralized education systems (and decentralized entities for decentralized education systems).** Considering how SEL curricula and programs are developed and disseminated (government with non-profit, companies, lobbying, etc.), entities that are better suited to work with existing national education systems and cooperate with existing national policies and government entities will have a better chance of being developed and succeeding to their full potential.
3) **Incorporate local stakeholder voices**, rather than just global stakeholders. Creating a statement of motivation for SEL adoption written by local stakeholders rather than global stakeholders and disseminating this statement in documents sets clear internal and external facing expectations and goals for SEL development within the target country.

4) **Consult with local educators and researchers** when forming SEL curricula. Merely translating existing US-based sources, curricula, and programming is not sufficient in adapting SEL curricula for the target culture. Consulting with local educators and researchers may better provide ways in which to address the target culture’s specific needs.

**Conclusion**

This project sought to investigate how the development of SEL programming by the Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF in China compared with the development of SEL programming by CASEL in the United States. From cross-referencing nationally enforced standards, namely the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021 in the United States, and “The Series of Resources for the MOE-UNICEF Social and Emotional Learning Project” developed by UNICEF in China (in both official English and translated Chinese versions) we found that China had largely modeled their standards off on CASEL’s framework developed in the US. However, in China, these standards were tailored by UNICEF China to be culturally specific to be a better fit for their existing education systems. Learning from China’s experience in developing SEL national standards, transnational entities should develop future SEL standards to incorporate the voices of local stakeholders, educators, and researchers to ensure that the curriculum is culturally sustaining to the realities of the immediate students they serve.

This project also considered what China’s Ministry of Education and UNICEF implied or stated as reasons for or potential benefits of developing SEL curricula, and how their approach is similar to or different from what the US Department of Education and CASEL imply or state as reasons for or potential benefits of developing SEL curricula. From looking at both the United States and China on some events that lead up to their respective developments of SEL curricula, there seem to be both proactive and reactive reasons driving each countries’ development of SEL curricula. These reactive reasons seem to depend more heavily on domestic incidents and trends while the proactive reasons seem to depend on global trends with developmental solutions that are more tailored to localized cultural specificities and needs. This illustrates the complex interplay of domestic and international motivators and players that make up the emergent SEL market today.
Summary of Part I

In the first part of my capstone project, I compared how the United States and China similarly and differently approached developing national social and emotional learning (SEL) standards. From this investigation, I found that China had largely adopted SEL standards developed by CASEL in the US, but they were tailored by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in China to be a culturally better fit for China’s existing education systems, incorporating local stakeholders’, educators’, and researchers’ voices. Historically, these standards have been made by Americans for Americans, but as SEL curricula become more popular worldwide in the current pandemic and post-pandemic era, policymakers, teachers, and administrators should ensure that they take students’ cultures into account when teaching social and emotional skills. Through my research, I presented best practices that international and local stakeholders could adopt to adjust these social and emotional standards to their respective cultural contexts.

Part II: How SEL Came to Be and How We Strayed From Original Intentions for SEL

Introduction

While doing my research into the development of the field of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), most of the sources I encountered only shared snippets of the larger story on how the field of SEL came to be. Existing sources mentioned the history of SEL in order to justify their practice of marketing the perceived benefits of their SEL curricula, products, and services, rather than discussing the trends and changes in the larger field of SEL over time to analyze this field with a critical lens.

Beyond not being able to find any sources that detailed the role of educational institutions, like Yale University, and organizations, like CASEL, had in the formation of SEL into the growing multi-billion dollar industry that it is today, I also grew increasingly skeptical of the catchy “research-backed” benefits of SEL that were repeatedly referenced and used in advertising and educational media. So far, this capstone has operated under the assumption that SEL is proven to have short-term and long-term benefits in student behavior, mental health, and academic performance. However, having been trained in the field of Psychology and its research best-practices and methods, I am skeptical of the validity and replicability of popularly claimed SEL research findings because the echo-chamber of the SEL field today mimics the replicability crisis that the field of Psychology has been dealing with for the past decade. I am not coming with the assumption that all of the research in the field of SEL is false and should be disregarded — it’s quite the contrary. I am arguing that once we critically analyze the study methods, scope, and limitations of such popular studies, we might have to shift the story we tell about the research to qualify to what extent the claims about the short-term and long-term benefits of SEL are true and to whom these benefits best apply.
As SEL is becoming more popular in mainstream media and becoming increasingly adopted by different stakeholders (including but not limited to districts, parents, counselors, companies, teachers) people need a source outside of CASEL (or other companies and organizations that gain a profit or notoriety from praising and not critically examining SEL) to detail what SEL is and how it came to be. By documenting the original intentions of founders in the field of SEL, analyzing the validity behind SEL research, and tracking major changes in the field of SEL over time, we can begin to understand why the field of SEL (as it stands in Spring of 2022) may have strayed from its original intentions of being created for and on behalf of student social and emotional development.

In Part II of this capstone project, I lay out the story of what SEL is, how it came to be defined, marketed, and adopted by many stakeholders for their own goals, and suggest how we can re-shift the way we think about SEL to make sure we incorporate cultural nuances so that we aren’t continuing to uphold students to a single, hegemonic model of a socially and emotionally well-adjusted student.

In this journalistic piece, I document the history and ideal future direction of SEL in narrative prose that any teacher, principal, administrator, parent, counselor, or community member can understand without having extensive prior knowledge of what SEL is. While the goal is to be as comprehensive as possible, it is not practically feasible to include every single known detail on SEL in this creative project. Instead, this project will track key events that have happened across different organizations and institutions, while also unraveling some of the more commonly seen misleading summaries of findings from popular SEL research studies and proposing what the different futures of the SEL industry could look like. By answering the first research question, “How has SEL come to be defined, marketed, and adopted by different stakeholders over time?” I hope to present possible ways of addressing the secondary research question, “How can we incorporate more culturally sustaining practices when addressing students’ social and emotional learning and development?”

**Literature Review**

There exists a handful of free online articles that aim to detail the history and progression of SEL in a similar fashion that I hope to achieve, but these articles are often out of date and/or do not include recent advances in SEL literature, trends, and understandings. Additionally, many sources (especially those from organizations or companies that directly work with SEL legislation, curricula, or products) take an overwhelmingly positive stance on SEL because lauding SEL in all aspects of its history and/or potential benefits support their own branding.

These existing free online articles generally seem to fall into one of three categories:
1) Written by non-profit organizations (such as CASEL and Edutopia) to advocate for SEL

Prominent examples of this category include “Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History” by Edutopia (2011), “Background on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)” by CASEL & the University of Illinois in Chicago (2007), and “Our History” by CASEL (2021b). Edutopia’s article describes the origins of SEL in New Haven, documenting key players and events including the founding of CASEL, and ends its scope at the H.R. 2437, the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011. From the first part of this capstone, we know that 2011 was only the initial boom of the SEL industry as we know it today. While this article does a good job of documenting the progression of SEL from the 1960s to 2011, it is relatively brief and missing the last 10 years of SEL research and progress.

CASEL’s version of SEL history is told from the perspective of CASEL as the founder of SEL and the leader of the field. It summarizes the different advancements in SEL that CASEL has had direct or indirect ties with, all up until the 2021 launch of the Weissberg Scholars Program in memory of Dr. Roger P. Weissberg’s passing that same year (CASEL, 2021c). Events and advances in SEL that do not include CASEL, any of its board members, or changes in laws, regulations, and policies within the United States are not included in this source because it does not serve to tell CASEL’s story.

2) Written by current or former classroom teachers to document the founding of SEL

Two examples of this category include “A Recent History of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)” written by Jennifer Osborne, an educator who has taught for over a decade and writes for other media sites like Educate and Edutopia, and “Did You Know that SEL Emerged Because of A Black Man? The True History of SEL” written by Byron M. McClure, an educator who created Lessons for SEL for “youth of color (especially Black males), as well as students who are LGBTQ, homeless, in the foster care system, and from high-poverty communities.” Osborne uses primary sources (focused on a handful of major legislation and initiatives) to give a timeline of key SEL events up to 2016 while McClure centers his narrative of how SEL was founded based on an interview with Dr. James Comer. Osborne’s timeline is limited in that it only documents nine significant events with no commentary nor critical analyses, and McClure’s interview is limited to documenting POC involvement in the development of SEL (as he has much to gain from promoting the POC narrative of SEL for his Lessons for SEL curriculum products).

3) Written by for-profit companies selling SEL products and services

“The Missing Piece: A History of SEL in Schools” by Aperture Education is a prime example of how companies mention the history of SEL and the “research-backed” benefits of SEL to sell a product. This particular piece was written in 2015 in preparation for the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provided a pathway for schools and districts to fund the purchase of 3rd party SEL products and services, like Aperture Education’s “research-based SEL assessment” that they advertise right below.
Unlike all these sources, I aim to tell the history of the field of SEL so that we can understand the ways in which the field of SEL can pivot to reorient itself with the original intentions of sustaining students’ cultures.

Recently, more scholars have been actively involved in criticizing the current direction of SEL. In a series of writings in a blog prose written by Project Achieve that critiques the current state of the SEL field, Dr. Howie Knoff, an educational consultant, directly addresses educational “colleagues” on his views on “the frenzy, flaws, and fads” of the SEL field (Knoff, 2021). This series of critiques center around a “concern that many districts and schools are “doing SEL” by purchasing on-line computer software to “teach” SEL skills and interactions” and has called for schools to evaluate the effectiveness of SEL programs before they adopt an off-the-shelf program as a “panacea” to the “increased social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (and staff) due to the Pandemic” (Knoff, 2021). Joshua Starr is also a longtime advocate for SEL who has previously shared his concerns about the current state of the SEL movement, particularly the “fuzziness of its terminology, the simplistic ways in which it is often commercialized and implemented, and its uncertain implications for racial and economic equity” (Starr, 2019). While Starr details some suggestions and future directions that school and district leaders could take to rectify SEL’s haziness and simplification and Dr. Knoff is concerned with advising administrators, school leaders, and district leaders to evaluate the quality of SEL programming, I am more concerned with urging local, district, state, national, and global stakeholders to take a more culturally-responsive approach in addressing students’ social and emotional development.

**Methodology**

Plentiful research has been done on SEL that mentions its progression and history, yet this type of writing is inaccessible to a majority of the public because they are written in academic prose, often in academic journals, books, or articles that are not free and accessible to the general public. An underlying assumption of this creative project is that most people (especially the types of community members that we are concerned about) do not fully read academic journals and research papers; instead, many get information about scientific research findings and new pedagogical trends from popular media, including but not limited to online blogs, newspapers, television shows, documentaries, books, and YouTube videos.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to have personal communications with Dr. James Comer, the founder of the Comer School Development Program that first pioneered focusing on students’ social and emotional development in schools. While this project will not publish this conversation nor quote him directly, Part II is still largely informed by his ideas and his career in addressing students’ social and emotional development in schools from a holistic, culturally-sustaining approach.

By writing this creative project in a free and accessible format (e.g. writing in journalistic prose, not assuming reader knowledge on key terms, including hyperlinks, etc.) I hope to bridge the gap between academia and popular media by making academic discourse transparent and
accessible. When pointing out discrepancies between catchy research finding summaries and the lengthy caveats and nuanced discussions in the actual literature to which the summary refers to, I hope to point out how SEL may have been manipulated away from its original intentions and, despite these deviations, how we can still preserve the valuable assets that SEL can provide.
The pursuit of addressing students’ social and emotional development is a concept as old as education itself. Even as far back as around 380 B.C. in *The Republic*, Plato proposed an education that was “intellectual as well as moral and religious, of science as well as of art, and not of youth only but of the whole of life.” While educators have been concerned for students’ social and emotional well-being since the beginning of schooling, a pedagogical and codified focus on the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) of students had its modern origins in New Haven, Connecticut.

In 1968, Dr. James Comer, a child psychiatrist from the Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center, and his colleagues began to pilot the Comer School Development Program at the two lowest income and lowest achieving elementary schools in the city of New Haven. This School Development Program empowered the two schools to improve their attendance record and behavioral problems and propelled these schools that were previously ranked last and second-to-last out of 33 schools to rival some of the city's highest income schools.

While the field of SEL was born with Dr. Comer's work, the industry of SEL was born with the founding of CASEL, one of the leading multidisciplinary networks of researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates across the United States in the SEL field. CASEL is most known for its SEL framework which is widely accepted and adopted throughout the SEL field. In 2010 when CASEL coined the term SEL following its successful lobbying and passing of the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2009 in the United States Congress, the SEL industry was born.

**How does CASEL define SEL?**

CASEL defines SEL as the following:

“Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”

In October 2020, CASEL added a whole new second paragraph to the existing definition of SEL:

“SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address...
**What prompted CASEL to update its definition?**

This updated definition clarifies the role of SEL in promoting equity and student agency while acknowledging that “the context and environment in which students live cannot be dissociated from their academic, social, and emotional development.” This change seems to respond to calls for transformative and antiracist SEL approaches, addressing cultural and structural competencies, such as students' race & ethnicity, environments, relationships, social and individual realities, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and access to opportunities that shape their social and emotional development.

At about the same time when the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged into mainstream media in the summer of 2020 calling for an end to racism, discrimination, and inequality experienced by Black people, a growing movement in education started to call for anti-racist, transformative SEL approaches. An inspirational leader in this movement is Dr. Dena Simmons, a distinguished researcher of Social-Emotional Learning who spent nearly a decade trying to make the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence’s RULER program more anti-racist. She resigned from Yale University’s Center for Emotional Intelligence in January 2021 after experiencing “a pattern of behavior by some colleagues that left her feeling ‘tokenized, undermined and bullied’” and now leads her own efforts in urging educators and researchers to critically think about how SEL research, practice, and policy can serve to help students “confront injustice, hate, and inequity.”

Anti-racist SEL approaches involve “taking stock of and eradicating policies that are racist [and] have racist outcomes [towards] making sure that ultimately, we’re working towards a much more egalitarian, emancipatory society.” This approach is meant to “push back on the idea that children of color need White educators to teach them to persevere and regulate their behavior” and critique how the SEL movement has, to date, been dominated by White researchers and policymakers directing programing at Black and Brown students in urban districts in the United States.

Anti-racist and transformative SEL is one of many different frameworks that call for SEL to perpetuate and foster cultural diversity/pluralism and to recognize how institutions, like schools, can serve a role in students’ whole well-being. While I align with these approaches, I personally advocate for “culturally sustaining” SEL in order to not falsely co-opt the antiracist, abolitionism-centered U.S. framework that advocates (like Dr. Simmons) fight for. Because theories and practices of anti-racism are rooted in the US Civil Rights Movement and a fight for abolition on behalf of specifically BIPOC and Latine communities from systems of white
supremacy, antiracist and transformative SEL does not address all young people and adults — all of the individuals who make up the transnational, diasporic, and decolonial cultural meshings of the multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic backgrounds of all students and communities found around the world — like CASEL’s definition details. This culturally-sustaining approach does not categorize students into singular homogenous groupings and avoids stereotyping students in sweeping generalizations. Instead, it addresses the cultures surrounding a whole child in the broadest sense of the word (including but not limited to race, ethnicity, nationality, language) and how culture interplays with a students’ local context to actively form and reinforce their social and emotional development.

CASEL’s revision to its definition of SEL is a significant step toward addressing the lack of social justice, equity, and culturally-sustaining practices in the previous CASEL framework. But a change in definition alone is not sufficient in addressing the institutional structure of CASEL in perpetuating systemic inequities. CASEL claims that they will put this change into their research, implementation, and policy agendas by using “evidence-based SEL strategies to define and advance the goals of equity and excellence in ways that are most meaningful to their local context.” While shifting and changing their research agenda does place much needed resources and attention towards social justice and equity-based SEL approaches, only time will tell if these strategic shifts lead to more inclusive changes in SEL. In the meantime, there still exists systematic problems with how CASEL handles SEL research today that calls for healthy skepticism towards CASEL’s handling of this new research.

Why CASEL’s “Evidence-Based” SEL Can Still Be Subjective

CASEL is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit that is not certified by the U.S. Department of Education or any other statutory or accreditation body as an official approving body of SEL or SEL programs and practice. Yet as one of the most prominent organizations in the field of SEL, CASEL serves as an unofficial seal-of-approval giver, vetting other SEL programs for The CASEL Program Guide and validating SEL initiatives as “research-backed” or “evidence-based” based on research conducted in-house or by researchers that make up their executive and advisory boards.

While CASEL’s research is influential within the field of academia and schooling, CASEL gains larger influence and power by proposing and passing legislation, especially national educational legislation. This is all feasible due to monetary support from sizable tax-deductible donations (in the scale of $12 million in the financial year of 2020) from well-endowed corporate and other foundations (like the Novo Foundation run by the daughter of Warren Buffett). With this money, CASEL has the means and reach necessary to lobby influential U.S. Congressional delegations for the passing of congressional acts like the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011 and the SEL components of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 and the
American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021. Additionally, it has the means to fund large meta-analyses, like Durlak et al (2011), the most frequently (mis)cited meta-analysis of SEL studies, and maintain the platform and network to propagate these “research-backed” findings towards its own agenda.

The food industry can give us insight into why this is problematic. In 2015, Simon’s “Nutrition Scientists on the Take from Big Food” revealed how the American Society for Nutrition accepts large monetary contributions to produce scientific research and lobbying efforts that fall in favor of big food companies, like PepsiCo, Nestlé, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s. These types of research funding partnerships create financial conflicts of interests because the funding for their continued research and notoriety depend on scientists’ continued positive feedback instead of critically examining the food products and the effects of consuming such products.

*Do we trust companies like Pepsi-Cola telling us that diet soda is healthier and better for weight loss than water? Do we trust companies like Welch’s telling us that Concord grape juice can make you a better driver?* No, we should not trust this research because there are obvious financial conflicts of interests. However, this raises the question on why we more readily trust organizations like CASEL with the mental, emotional, and social health of the most impressionable minds of young students despite their financial conflicts of interest, similar to those of big food companies.

This is the catch-22 we face when a field of academic study or a pedagogical framework like SEL becomes a multi-billion dollar industry. In order to fund the research necessary to figure out if SEL programming is effective, reduced of possible harms, and true to its well-intended origins, we have to market SEL as fully effective and beneficial to attract the funding and resources needed to drive the verification research in the first place.

**Following the SEL Money**

Further tracking the market aspect of education might give us insight into how this catch-22 situation in SEL came to be. Market analyses forecast that the SEL market will grow around 22.7% to 24.7% from 2021 to 2026. This means that with the current rate of return on current investment in SEL initiatives, products, and companies predict a growth in the global SEL market valuation from about 1.6 to 2.0 billion USD in 2020 to about 5.6 to 6.3 billion USD in 2026 (Estimates from Markets and Markets & Mordor Intelligence Analysis Sample) Markets and Markets particularly cites that this growth is due to a growing demand, support, and awareness of SEL by educational institutions and governmental programs, and the proliferation of computing (edtech) and increasing social and emotional distance during the COVID-19 pandemic.
While these factors are driving the growth of the SEL market, they alone do not address where the money is coming from and why the money is funneling towards SEL. Aside from VC (venture capital) and non-profit funding that generally has a vested interest in edtech and/or SEL in the (post-)pandemic era, a large surge of funding for SEL comes from the ARP Act of 2021 that recently injected $123 billion directly into the education market, which schools are eligible to use to fund SEL curricula training and subscription packages. Additionally, The NoVo Foundation (which has historically funded a large portion of CASEL’s operations and research) has been increasingly issuing annual RFPs (request for funding proposals) for a number of years for teachers/classrooms ($5,000) and schools/districts (up to $25,000) to support the buying of and research in SEL training.

CASEL’s existing SEL framework and program guide encourages districts and schools to shop from an ever growing list of pre-approved SEL programs. Just from April 1st to April 19th, 2022, a time period of a little over two weeks, CASEL’s SELect programs on its program guide increased from 77 to 86 programs. When an industry grows this rapidly, it becomes more difficult to manage and evaluate each individual program with a consistent level of scrutiny and high standards. With the market of SEL growing more rapidly and exponentially than it has ever grown before, program leaders and institutions like CASEL should ensure that each iteration of SEL is still keeping true to the original goals of SEL.

**Who are the stakeholders in SEL?**

Since SEL’s first conception, Dr. Comer has been framing SEL as a way to address the whole child, including but not limited to the communities, the relationships, and the people that surround the child. Dr. Comer’s School Development Program stresses allocating resources towards teacher training and addressing the unique cultural needs and competencies for each child. Rather than forcing all students into an SEL competency model at school that conflicts with what they learn at home, the original SEL model worked with the teachers, parents, mental-health professionals, principal, and the students themselves to create a comprehensive school plan that gave agency to the people on the ground level to collectively make a school climate conducive to learning.

Nowadays, when we think of stakeholders in education and the industry of education, we often are talking about people in powerful positions, such as administrators, school boards, companies, government entities. Usually, only the individuals within this narrow definition of stakeholders have the authority and agency to adopt, distribute, and enforce SEL curricula. In this process, we often neglect those (parents, teachers, principals, counselors, community members, etc.) who are actually interacting with the students on a day-to-day basis to help them develop socially and emotionally. SEL was created for and on behalf of what happens in classrooms and going back to
these original intentions, these people on the ground are the most important stakeholders for students’ social and emotional development.

The ways in which organizations like CASEL have defined, marketed, and adopted SEL is a departure from Comer’s original intentions in creating the SEL field. What previously focused on the whole student, addressing the entire school and community ecosystem that provided structural supports for each student and brought them in as stakeholders in a student's education, has been distorted and boiled down to standardized assessment models and a laundry list of competency standards that students have to achieve. SEL has been commodified into easy curriculum packages, programs, and products that school districts and administrators can buy to serve as a bandaid over the blistering wound of students’ deteriorating mental and emotional health and wellbeing.
This is no new problem. SEL had been on this trajectory of veering towards assessment, competency-based learning instead of the original intentions of addressing students' social and emotional development since the No Child Left Behind act. We were hurt by the political change in the country around the turn of the 21st century with the Leave No Child Behind decision to focus on curriculum and assessments, rather than the development of the overall student and the preparation of that student for life.

However, SEL is far from something that should be assessed, but rather something cultivated throughout schooling instead of taught like other subjects. We still keep acting like with the perfect curriculum or a better teaching method that we are going to solve all the social and emotional deficiencies of all students. The world 60 years ago is not what it looks like today. Today, we are faced with unprecedented times, when students are "attending" school by logging in on a zoom device because of a pandemic, trying to find jobs in one of the largest recessions, and encountering an emerging world war at every turn. Buying our way out of this problem won’t cut it. But perhaps if we invest in all stakeholders, invest in training and equipping the teachers, parents, principals, and community leaders and students to help them address their social and emotional needs, we can truly create equitable, anti-racist, transformative, culturally sustaining SEL for all people.
Appendix

Evaluating Popular Study Claims

These study claims are taken from CASEL’s *What Does the Research Say?* article.

1) SEL interventions that address the five core competencies increased students’ academic performance by *11 percentile points*, compared to students who did not participate (Durlak et al, 2011)

*What does the 11 percentile points even mean?*

In the original study, “academic performance” is measured through standardized reading or math achievement test scores (e.g. the Stanford Achievement Test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills) and students’ overall GPA and/or grades in specific subjects (usually reading or math). Because this is a meta-analysis, we are looking at the degree (as opposed to statistical significance) of heterogeneity (i.e. non-similarity, deviation) among a set of studies along a 0-100% scale. They found that an “average member of the control group would demonstrate an 11-percentile gain in achievement if they had participated in an SEL program.” (p.417) This does *not* mean that SEL programming raised students' academic performance by 11 percentile points (which implies a cause-effect relationship). Instead, it means that if students who did not get SEL programming were to have gotten SEL programming, they might have improved their academic performance (test scores, grades) by 11 percentile points (i.e. go from 80% to 91%) (which instead implies a post-hoc analysis-based correlation).

More recent studies have found that there is no statistically significant evidence supporting that SEL can directly improve students’ academic performance:

- Panayiotou et al (2019) tested a model of SEL in 9-12 year olds in the UK and found that social-emotional competence did not predict academic attainment.
- Kroese (2020) investigated the impact that social-emotional skills had on academic growth during the first 8 weeks of the 2020-2021 school year for a class of first-grade students. Academic growth was evaluated by the students' math gains measured by the STAR math assessment. The SAEBRS teacher assessment was used to measure the students' social-emotional skills, specifically social, emotional, and academic behavior. The data did not indicate statistical significance connecting SEL to academic growth.

2.1) An SEL approach was consistently effective with *all demographic groups both inside and outside the United States*. This supports the idea that social and emotional assets
promoted in SEL can support the positive development of students from diverse family backgrounds and geographic contexts. (Taylor et al., 2017)

What does it mean when they say all demographic groups both inside and outside the United States?

This meta-analysis looked at 82 school-based SEL interventions. 38 of these 82 studies looked at students outside of the United States. However, it is unclear where these 38 schools were located.

The study directly contradicts this claim of SEL being effective for “all demographic groups both inside and outside of the United States” when “more than 40% (34 of 82) of the studies did not report any specific percentages of student ethnicity” (p. 1168) They simply did not have enough data to be able to claim that SEL is beneficial for all demographic groups when they do not have enough data and are still unclear whether demographic subgroups of students benefit differentially from SEL intervention (p. 1159).

2.2) Three different research groups — based not just in the United States (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) but also the United Kingdom (Wiglesworth et al., 2016) and The Netherlands (Sklad et al., 2012) — have independently reached the same general conclusion about universal school-based SEL programs

Only focusing on western countries that publish in English and are in the global west (like the United States and Europe) is definitionally not large and diverse enough of a sample size to make any generalizations about universality or global effects.

3) SEL interventions show the largest effect size when the intervention is designed with a specific context or culture in mind. This supports the idea that SEL is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ intervention. (Wiglesworth et al., 2016)

This study calls for culturally-sustaining SEL curricula. While it still is focused on students from the United Kingdom, it begins to highlight how SEL cannot be distilled down to a singular, universal program.

4) A recent study on multiple SE skill-building programs found over an $11 return on investment for each dollar invested (Belfield et al, 2015)

This 2015 report from the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, requested by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the NoVo Foundation, presents the results of a cost-benefit analysis evaluating six
different SEL intervention programs. The report concludes that high-quality, research-validated social and emotional learning programs bring a return of $11 for every $1 invested.

Similarly, The Seattle Social Development Project claims that SEL interventions used with study participants in grades 1-6 lead to a return on investment of more than $2,500 per student ($2.25 for every $1 invested).

A third cost-benefit analysis by the Life Skills project found that SEL skills regarding self-management, substance abuse prevention, and developing social skills showed a return on investment of nearly $1,300 per student ($37 for every $1 invested).

There is wide variability between the findings of each of these studies because they depend on the categories of savings (“benefits”) that each research group decided to focus on (i.e. how much taxpayers would have had to pay if a student did not get an SEL intervention and the government had ended up needing to pay for their X, such as health care associated with major depression or substance abuse, K-12 grade repetition, public assistance, juvenile imprisonment, etc.). What is most misleading about all of these types of studies is that they are not doing a conservative cost-benefit analysis of SEL programming. Instead, these numbers detail the maximum costs associated with each individual if they did not receive an SEL intervention and needed every government assistance associated with a lack of SEL intervention.

Taking the Seattle Social Development Project as an example (which is the most conservative of these three studies), it is not realistic to say that because a student did not get this SEL intervention in 1st-6th grade that they will end up in the criminal justice system, repeat a grade, need health care associated with major depression, have a teen birth, and cause property loss associated with alcohol abuse or dependence. Instead, these numbers are used internally by government or program organizations to see the potential costs of not implementing SEL in the worst case scenario. Therefore, it is inappropriate and wrong for SEL marketing to include these numbers because it misleads consumers to believe that for every dollar spent on some SEL program or curricula material that they will gain an exponentially higher value result in return.
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