



# A GLOBAL LOOK AT IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES THROUGH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Jennifer Adams

## 1. Introduction

The field of social emotional learning has its origin in the United States, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to evolve through to the 1980s. In 1994, Roger Weissberg, a psychology professor from Yale University founded CASEL under its original name: the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning.

A lot has happened since then. Over the past three decades, there have been hundreds of studies, with mounting evidence citing the positive impacts of social emotional learning on learning and well-being in schools and in the workplace. The movement has expanded from the education sector in the United States to multiple sectors in countries around the world, albeit sometimes using alternative nomenclature (e.g. life skills, soft skills, transformational skills).

The movement has faced some push back over the decades. Some argued and continue to argue that education should focus only on the core skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. However, research is clear that this should not be a case of “either/or” but rather a “both/and”. In 2001, CASEL changed its name to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, highlighting the need for both academic and social emotional skills. Fast forward to 2025, at the tip of the iceberg of AI,

the discourse has shifted to how social emotional learning plays a critical role in helping students develop the human skills they will need to flourish in school, in work, in communities, and in society as a whole.

This paper provides a short synopsis of the “what” and “why” of social emotional learning. It highlights a few examples from education systems across the globe (Canada/Ontario, Bulgaria, and India) that have made some significant “policy moves”, embedding social emotional learning into their curriculum policy documents. The paper also calls attention to three examples of significant “program moves” that are having a positive impact on children and adults around the world. The delineation between policy and program moves is intentional - some jurisdictions have led with a policy move and the identification of programs has followed; others have led with access to programs and the creation of SEL policy at a later time.

The intent of this paper is to provide a glimpse into the now global nature of social emotional learning and to cause us to pause and reflect on how we can learn from each other as we continue our work in transforming education systems.

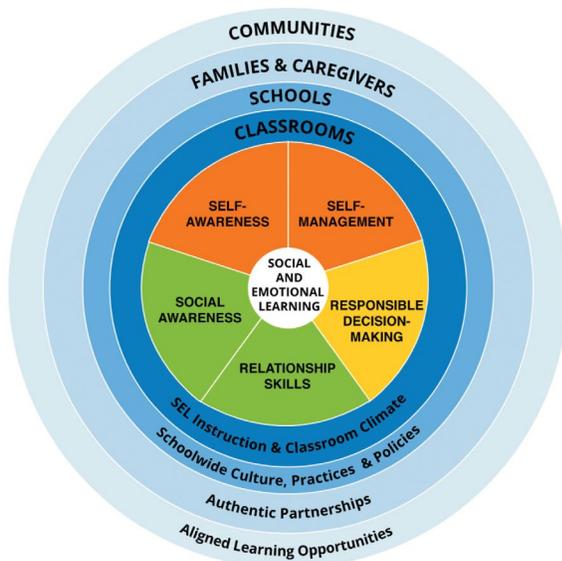


## 2. What is Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?

According to [CASEL](#), organization that emerged in 1994 in Chicago, USA,

“Social and emotional learning 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.”

Image 1. [CASEL Framework](#)



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**SELF-AWARENESS:** The abilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.

**SELF-MANAGEMENT:** The abilities to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.

**SOCIAL AWARENESS:** The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.

**RELATIONSHIP SKILLS:** The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.

**RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING:** The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

## 3. Why SEL?

Back in 2019, [Salzburg Global](#), a non-profit organization with over 40,000 Fellows from more than 170 countries, released its Statement on Social and Emotional Learning. In this statement, they stated that “social and emotional skills are key human capabilities that allow individuals to manage their emotions, work with others, and achieve their goals.



They are crucial for the wellbeing and success of every child and adult, and for the future of our societies and economies.”

The [Salzburg Global Statement on Social Emotional Learning](#) recommends that every education system explicitly includes SEL in their curriculum and pedagogical/assessment practices from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

[Karanga: The Global Alliance for SEL and Life Skills](#) composed of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from around the world have continued this important work, noting the urgency to support all learners as they develop the skills to succeed in school, work, and life.

## 4. OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES)

The OECD launched its first international survey on social and emotional skills for 10- and 15-year-old students in 2019, with a second cycle in 2023 for a total of 23 education systems across 21 countries. A series of reports have since been released with findings demonstrating the relationship between social and emotional skills and learning/wellbeing.

Findings from the first cycle showed that students with higher emotional regulation skills as well as higher energy and trust engaged in healthier behaviours, felt calmer, were more active, and were less anxious in class and during tests.

Image 2. The case for SEL and life skills

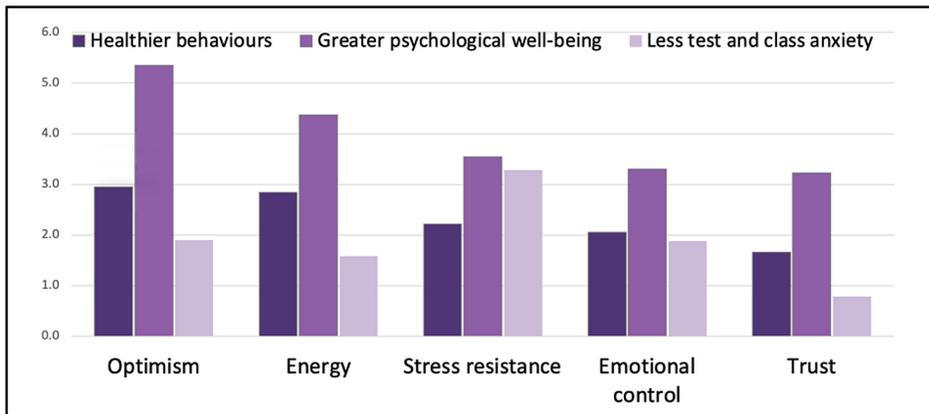
  
KARANGA

				
<b>Future of Work</b>	<b>Mental Health</b>	<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>Social Cohesion</b>	<b>Achieving the SDGs</b>
How can education equip all young people with the skills and competencies for rapidly-evolving economies and the digital revolution?	What can education do to help promote well-being and reduce mental health challenges?	How can we improve learning outcomes in all contexts, especially for those children and adults on the margins of society?	How can we help young people feel confident in their own identities and vested in community at local to global levels?	What skills and behaviors do populations need in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

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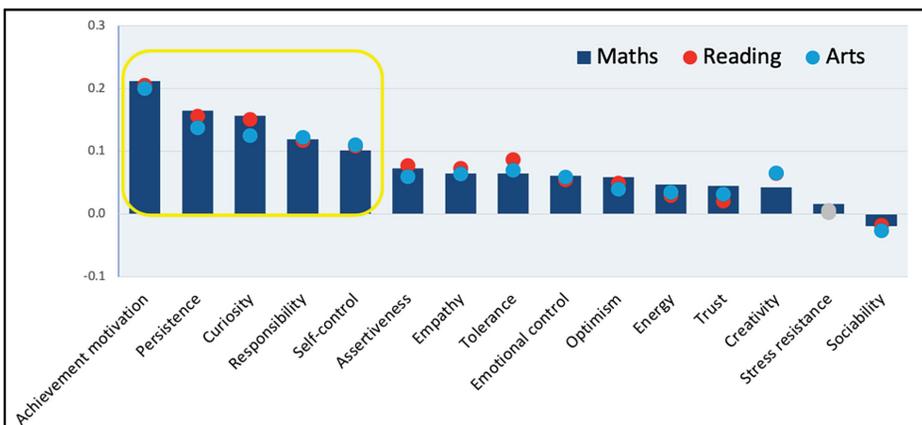
**Chart 1.** Students with emotional regulation skills, energy, and trust are happier and healthier. *Standardized regression coefficients of individual skills on students' health and well-being outcomes, 15-year-olds, average across the study sites.*



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Findings from the second cycle demonstrated that students with higher levels of social and emotional skills, particularly achievement motivation, persistence, curiosity, responsibility, and self control, had higher grades in school.

**Chart 2.** Students with greater social and emotional skills achieve better grades in reading, maths and arts. *Standardised regression coefficients of skills on grades, 15-year-olds, average across site.*



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## 5. Policy Moves

### 5.a. Ontario, Canada

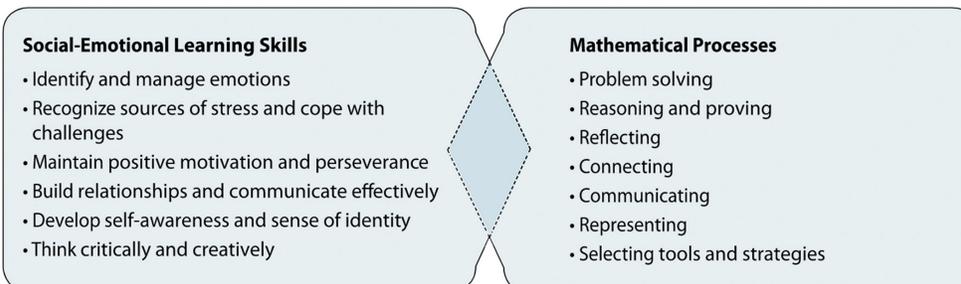
While many effective SEL programs exist, there are significant benefits when the development of these skills is embedded across all curricular areas. Math and SEL have natural links. In 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Education identified SEL skills as a math strand in their elementary curriculum policy *Mathematics: Grades 1 to 8 (2020)* as well as in the destreamed Grade 9 math curriculum policy *Mathematics: Grade 9 (2021)* the following year. The SEL skills strand is described as focusing on “students’ development and application of social-emotional learning skills to support their learning of math concepts and skills, foster their overall well-being and ability to learn, and help them build resilience and thrive as math learners. As they develop SEL skills, students demonstrate a greater ability to understand and apply the mathematical processes, which are critical to supporting learning in mathematics.” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020)

Six elements of SEL have been identified in this math curriculum:

- Identify and manage emotions
- Recognize sources of stress and cope with challenge
- Maintain positive motivation and perseverance
- Build relationships and communicate effectively
- Develop self-awareness and sense of identity
- Think critically and creatively

Students develop these social emotional skills by applying mathematical processes (problem-solving, reasoning and proving, reflecting, connecting, communicating, representing, selecting tools and strategies) as they develop their conceptual understanding and procedural fluency in mathematics. The link between the skills and the mathematical processes informs the evidence-based pedagogical practices to be used in the classroom.

Chart 3. Link between social-emotional skills and mathematical processes



Source: Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education (2021-a). The author has stated that she holds the necessary permissions for the reproduction and use of the image in this article.



Some resource providers (e.g. [Knowledgehook](#)) have developed supports for teachers to assist with the teaching and learning of social emotional skills within the math class.

## Impact

Over the years, both Canada and Ontario have scored well on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) - Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of 15 year olds achievement in reading, mathematics and science.

The 2022 PISA results in mathematics marked the participation of the first cohort in Ontario under the curriculum policy change that includes SEL as a strand in mathematics. Ontario students had a mean score of 495, placing them within the top 15 internationally (of 81 participating countries) and second nationally in Canada.

## 5.b. Bulgaria

Recently, Bulgaria has moved forward with SEL in their national education system based in part, on a review of 213 controlled studies that indicated a strong correlation with improved academics, support for prosocial development, and a reduction in behavioural and emotional problems. The aim was to combat challenges faced in schools - assaults against teachers, bullying and violence with students, and low academic achievement. On

a broader society level, the goal was to reduce aggression and emigration, to better prepare students with core competencies, and ultimately, to improve the country's economy.

SEL has been incorporated into the National standards and is included in the national competency framework. SEL training will be offered through the National Center for Qualification of Pedagogical Specialists run by the Ministry of Education and Science. A National Program for SEL has been launched by the Ministry which will scale up the program. A program with Plovdiv University is being launched which will offer teachers who have graduated as well as students training in SEL

## Impact

Bulgaria participated in the 2022 OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Learning. Compared to the average across participating countries, there were larger differences between advantaged and disadvantaged 15 year olds on social and emotional skills, including tolerance, creativity, and curiosity. Students in Bulgaria reported being absent or late for school more than students from participating countries and fewer anticipated moving on to post secondary education.

Results on the OECD's PISA in 2022, indicated that 15-year-old students in Bulgaria scored lower than the OECD average in mathematics, reading, and science. Like many other countries, Bulgaria's PISA scores



declined in 2022 compared to 2018 in both mathematics and reading.

The Ministry, with the assistance of the Lachezar Tsotsorkov Foundation, will monitor to see if the policy moves on SEL have an impact on improved academic and well-being outcomes for students.

## 5.c. India

In a pioneering effort to embed social-emotional well-being within the core of public education, the Happiness Curriculum (HC) was launched in 2018. Implemented across more than 1,000 government schools and reaching nearly 800,000 students annually, the initiative emphasizes student well-being by incorporating mindfulness, social-emotional learning (SEL), and critical thinking into daily educational practice. Central to this initiative is a dedicated 45-minute “happiness period” embedded into the school timetable, which includes structured storytelling, guided reflection, mindfulness exercises, roleplay, and dialogic discussion. Each academic day begins with a short meditation session to ground students in the present moment, fostering calmness and attentiveness.

Distinguished by its whole-child approach, the Happiness Curriculum is designed to cultivate five foundational competencies:

1. Self-awareness (understanding one’s thoughts and emotions),

2. Mindfulness (cultivating presence and regulation).
3. Critical thinking (developing thoughtful and reflective decision-making).
4. Empathy and relationship skills (fostering compassion and communication).
5. Emotional regulation (enhancing coping and self-management strategies).

The curriculum places emphasis on learning processes rather than outcomes, encouraging practices such as journaling, self-reflection, open dialogue, and values-based engagement. This model has inspired similar efforts in a number of other Indian states.

## Impact

A study using the Social Emotional Well-being Scale (SEW) and a teacher competency scale was conducted in 2022–23, involving 2,700 students (Grades 6–8) and 343 Happiness Curriculum teachers, providing robust evidence of the curriculum’s effectiveness. The study found a 25.5% overall increase in students’ social-emotional learning (SEL) scores. Significant improvements were observed in emotional wellbeing (15%), personal wellbeing (27%), resilience (27%), social well-being (23%), and perceived social support (40%). Teachers also showed an 8.4% improvement in key competencies, with gains in classroom management (12%), relationship facilitation (10%), empathy (8.3%), and metacognitive awareness (2%)



Classroom observations revealed that teachers were able to create a positive classroom environment, confidently facilitating activities and encouraging active interaction. Reflective responses were observed, especially when teachers asked nuanced follow-up questions. Classroom instruction (quality and delivery style) played a critical role in shaping students' learning experiences. It was noted that students felt comfortable and confident sharing their ideas with their teachers. Most students were observed to be actively engaged in their learning.

Student interviews indicated that mindfulness practices helped them feel calm and focused, while storytelling supported moral reflection and creative expression. "Happiness Diaries" and activity-based learning provided students with valuable opportunities for self-reflection and confidence-building. Parent interviews corroborated these shifts, reporting improvements in communication with children, in self-discipline, greater interest in studies, and improvements in academic performance.

Educators noted positive changes in students - better participation in class, a decrease in aggression and anger, the development of a culture of respectfulness, increased awareness of the importance of interpersonal relationships, and improved communication and listening skills.

The Happiness Curriculum represents a significant systemic intervention to center student well-being within the mainstream

public education system. The observed improvements in both student social-emotional outcomes and teacher SEL facilitation capacities affirm that SEL can be effectively scaled and sustained when meaningfully integrated into classroom practices. By fostering emotionally nurturing learning environments, the curriculum contributes to increased academic engagement and supports the development of resilience, reflective capacity, and relational depth in young learners.

## 6. Program Moves

### 6.a. Think Equal (UK and beyond)

Think Equal is a social emotional skills (SES) programme for 3 to 6 year olds that was originally developed and implemented in the UK. It is now offered in 38 countries in 48 languages, and in 11 of these countries has been embedded in the National Curriculum alongside numeracy and literacy. By embedding SEL in national curricula, Think Equal contributes to systemic transformation in education, addressing equity and school readiness from the earliest years. The program has reached over 550,000 children worldwide.

Teachers receive training, classroom resources, and weekly home-based activities to share with parents or caregivers. Children are taught 25 key competencies based on the science of early brain development such as



emotional control, gender equality, environmental stewardship, and peer social skills towards the goals of better mental health, inclusion, well-being, and positive life outcomes.

## Impact<sup>1</sup>

Think Equal's impact is supported by a growing body of global evidence, including randomised controlled trials, teacher surveys, and independent evaluations. This programme has been evaluated through three Randomised Controlled Trials demonstrating significant impact on developmental outcomes linked to academic attainment.

A Yale University-led randomized controlled study in Botswana compared intervention and control groups, finding statistically significant improvements in emotion regulation, reduced anger/aggression, and enhanced social competence. The Federation University Australia RCT showed that disadvantaged children with poorer baseline scores benefited most, directly addressing achievement gaps. A third RCT in Colombia led by Innovations for Poverty Action found significant improvements in self-regulation, self-awareness, gender stereotypes, cognitive learning and prosocial behaviours.

End-of-Year Teacher Surveys (2023-2024, N=93) from Greater Manchester (GM) showed 78% of practitioners and teachers

reported improved social skills compared to previous cohorts without the programme. A rigorous longitudinal study is currently underway with the University of Sussex (2024-2025), focusing on the Level 2 rollout in Greater Manchester, not early years (EY) settings. It uses direct child assessments, teacher/caregiver surveys, and structured classroom observations to measure impact on social-emotional development and school readiness outcomes.

The Think Equal programme has demonstrated positive effects on early childhood learning, social-emotional development, teacher confidence and well-being, as evidenced by feedback from multiple implementations globally. Findings from Greater Manchester (UK), South Africa (Eastern Cape), Ukraine, The Gambia, and Pakistan consistently indicate improvements in early learning engagement, socio-emotional skills, and classroom dynamics.

The goals of Think Equal align closely with early childhood priorities in Mexico and across Latin America, where national education strategies increasingly recognise the foundational role of social and emotional development in reducing inequality, improving school readiness, and promoting inclusive education. Mexico's National Early Education Policy (PNEI) and regional efforts under UNESCO's 2030 Education Agenda both highlight the importance of equitable early interventions and whole-child development. Think Equal contributes to these goals by reaching children in

<sup>1</sup> The results of the studies and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) can be provided upon request directly from the organization in charge.



marginalised and underserved communities, supporting teachers with structured SEL tools, and generating rigorous evidence to inform policy at scale.

### **6.b. Amal Alliance - Colors of Kindness / SEL COLORI School Bus (refugee and displaced students)**

The Colors of Kindness program is designed for students aged 6-12 who are in refugee camps or formal school settings. The objective is to address disruptions in schooling, particularly in crisis situations, providing the opportunity to enhance social inclusion, improve well-being, and ensure equitable access to education.

The program is delivered through guided audio instruction, and visual characters, with resources provided to teachers. Colors of Kindness is now offered in Bangladesh, Greece, and Uganda.

Given the unprecedented number of under-school-age children living in shelters, the Massachusetts Governor's Executive Office of Education, in USA, and the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) supported the creation and pilot of the COLORI Express, which provides developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed care to migrant and displaced children living in remote motel shelters. The goal is to support vulnerable families during this time of transition by providing access to high quality social and emotional learning Colors of Kindness

curriculum for children ages 3-6, as well as opportunities for play. From June 2024 to June 2025, over 1,200 children have participated in SEL programming through the COLORI Express.

### **Impact**

Several process evaluations of Colors of Kindness were conducted by third parties for Amal Alliance and partner organizations. In Greece, across 3 public schools and 6 NGOs, the Harvard EASEL Lab showed statistically significant increases in the children's social and emotional skills. In Uganda, 4 schools participated in the pilot in a refugee settlement with high learner drop out rates.

The evaluators note improvements in foundational English literacy skills. Many students were able to read out loud, and showed better listening and reading comprehension. Similarly, there was a significant improvement in foundational numeracy skills. By the end of the program, all learners could count and the majority could perform 1-digit and 2-digit addition and subtraction. Of the 330 learners who completed the first cohort, 322 enrolled back into mainstream primary school after the program.

From June 2024-June 2025, the COLORI Express has been piloted in Massachusetts. Families have commented on the visible behavioral changes in the children. Boston University's School of Social Work is currently evaluating the program, and will be releasing the full report in November 2025.



### 6.c. Atentamente (Mexico)

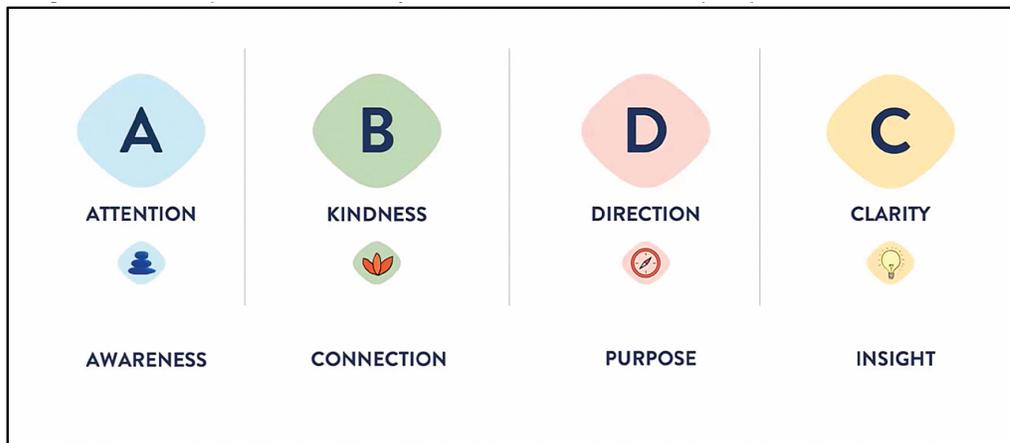
Atentamente is a not-for-profit organization aimed at improving personal and social well-being at scale by reducing violence and inequality, providing quality education, promoting mental health, and preparing youth for a complex and uncertain world. They base their programs on the belief that well-being is a skill that can be learned. Atentamente has co-developed a theoretical framework based on training to cultivate human potential: *The ABCD of Well-Being*.

Atentamente has multiple programs adapted for various age groups, in formal and informal education settings as well as in workplaces (most recently in hospitals) and has worked in 22 states throughout Mexico. The programs are systemic, evidence-based, and sustainable.

Sustainability is based on building local capacity so the program can continue after Atentamente staff have left.

The theory of change for the program *Educating for Well-being* is based on working with adults to help them develop social emotional skills and enhanced well-being so that these educators can, in turn, positively impact the students with whom they work. The program encompasses the entire eco-system in schools: teachers, principals, supervisors, sector chiefs. *Educating for Well-being* combines a teacher trainer program, with a leadership program, and a grade appropriate curriculum. Educators received a series of in-person workshops as well as 60 hours of online learning. To date, nearly 50,000 educators in 16 states have engaged with the program, impacting at least 800,000 students

Image 3. The four pillars of a healthy mind from Atentamente's perspective



Source: Chernicoff L, Rodríguez E. (2015). The author has stated that she holds the necessary permissions for the reproduction and use of the image in this article.



in over 25,000 schools. *Educating for Well-being* has achieved multi-year, systemic implementation in at least three states and partnered with educational authorities in over half of Mexico’s states, with a focus on vulnerable communities, including Maya-speaking regions of the Yucatán Peninsula.

### Impact

A randomized controlled trial for *Educating for Well-being* during the pandemic featured a data collection of pre and post surveys, self reports, and administrative data. It included more than 2,100 educators, 421 preschools, and 2,432 students in the state of Sinaloa.

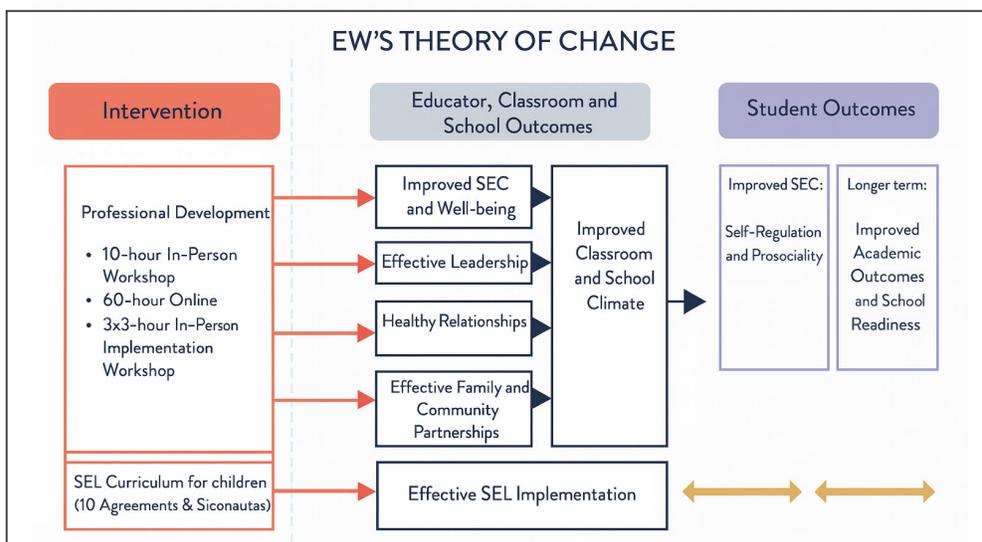
The attendance rate was 79% with 70% received certification.

Results from the randomized controlled trial indicated significant personal and professional benefits for the educators, for example:

- 90% experienced lower stress levels
- 89% stated the program helped them cope with the COVID-19 crisis
- 92% noted an increase in social emotional competencies
- 93% acknowledged the acquisition of more tools to integrate SEL into daily lessons

Statistical analysis included Cohen’s “d” coefficient to determine the magnitude of difference between two groups, beyond knowing if there is a statistically significant difference. Overall for the educators, there was improved self-awareness ( $d = 0.11 - 0.16$ ), improved emotional regulation ( $0.17 - 0.46$ ), improved prosociality ( $0.10 - 0.21$ ), and improved well-being ( $0.12 - 0.23$ ). These effects prevailed through to the following year.

Flowchart 1. Educating for Well-being’s theory of change



Source: Chernicoff, L. I., Giuliani, M. F., Olvera Puentes, J. M., & Greenberg, M. (2025). The author has stated that she holds the necessary permissions for the reproduction and use of the image in this article.



Teachers reported significant increases in the emotional regulation ( $d = 0.498$ ) and prosocial behaviour ( $0.365$ ) of their students. The results from this randomized

controlled trial are consistent with the evaluations done in other *Atentamente* contexts outside of this study.

## 7. Summary and Concluding Statement

This paper has provided a high-level look at the “what” and “why” of social emotional learning as well as a few examples of policies and programs from around the world. The intent was to inspire those with roles in improving outcomes for students, (e.g. teachers, principals, district leaders, as well as policy makers at the school supervision zones, state and national levels) to reflect on potential next steps in the Mexican education system.

The following questions are provided for continued reflection:

- To what extent is social emotional learning included in classrooms in the Mexican education system?
- To what extent is social emotional learning embedded in curriculum policy?
- After reflecting upon the examples cited in this article as well as exploring inventories of SEL programs from other sources, which types of programs would best meet the needs of our learners at different grade levels?
- What types of professional learning opportunities will be needed for teachers and school principals to effectively implement best practices?

- Is the current approach to social emotional learning in Mexico’s national teacher preparation curriculum having a positive impact on teacher readiness to enter the profession? How can this approach be improved over time?
- How will we support the adults in our education systems to develop their own social emotional skills?
- How will parents/caregivers and the community be engaged in helping students develop their social emotional skills outside of the classroom?
- How can we partner with the local business and industry communities to help students see the relevance of these skills in the workplace?
- How will we monitor and measure the impact of our strategies?
- How will we share our successes and challenges with our communities as well as with other education systems, with the intent of learning from and with each other?

Educational leaders in Mexico, like their global counterparts, have an opportunity to consider how social emotional learning can foster the human skills students will need to thrive in a complex world.



## Acknowledgements

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## Jennifer Adams

Jennifer recently completed an eight-year term as Director of Education (Superintendent) for the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board in Ontario, Canada, leading a diverse student population of 73,000 across 150 schools. She has also served as superintendent of curriculum, elementary school principal, and French teacher, and holds a doctorate in educational administration from the University of Toronto/OISE.

She chaired the OECD Informal Advisory Group on

the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills and is currently on the Executive Committee of Karanga: The Global Alliance for Social Emotional Learning and Life Skills. She also serves as Chair of the Board of Governors at the University of Ottawa and as Editor-in-Chief of *Signature Leadership* by Knowledgehook. As a senior education consultant, her work focuses on leadership and talent development, recruitment, and strategic planning for school systems and education technology organizations.