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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Social Emotional Well-Being for Educators*, by Michelle L. Trujillo.

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# ADULT SEL: JUST ANOTHER EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE?

Life is filled with adversity, regardless of living through a pandemic. With any trial or tragedy, people tend to feel uncertain, helpless, overwhelmed, and even a bit afraid. All of these emotions, as well as others we might experience when confronting challenges, highlight the need for us to leverage our social emotional abilities in order to compassionately and effectively care for ourselves and, ultimately, others. We can and will ignite hope in the lives of our students, colleagues, and ourselves when we first address our own *social emotional well-being*. Some call this adult SEL, which may cause you to wonder, “Is this just another passing educational initiative?” My answer is emphatically, “No, *and* it doesn’t have to be called adult SEL!” Now, before I create pandemonium, let me take you back to my prior suggestion that “how we be” is more important than “what we do.” I will specifically use the term “social emotional learning” and its common definition and competencies to give structure to *a way of being* that will ignite hope for our students, their families, our colleagues, and ourselves. It is the *way of being* that is embodied in this term that matters.

To take my disclaimer just one step further, I realize in the educational context the acronym SEL stands for **s**ocial **e**motional **l**earning, but couldn’t it also stand for **s**kills for **e**nriched **l**iving, **s**tandards for **e**ducational **l**eadership, or even **s**ome **e**ssential **l**ifeskills? Okay, so maybe “lifeskills” isn’t an actual word (actually, it is two: life skills), but do you get my point? The term “social emotional learning” may or may not weather the storm of change when the next educational initiative or program is introduced, but the need to promote skills that foster social emotional health and growth will always persevere. Let’s consider the perspective of author, professor, and SEL expert Dr. Maurice Elias:<sup>4</sup>

I think of SEL as the skills of *everydayship*. They are the set of skills that enable us to get along in the world. They are the foundation of all relationships and the engine of all actions. SEL skills are part of us from the moment we enter the earth and all the way through our journey through life. They are no more and no less important than oxygen. Adversity tests our skills and our character, which is part of my definition of SEL—that is, if SEL skills are the engine, or the propellers, then character and virtues are the rudder.

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Dr. Maurice Elias

We require both for our journey. Rough seas, turbulent air, cratered roads, and other adversities challenge us, impede our progress, discourage us, sometimes throw us off course. We might try shortcuts and other expedient ways to cope with adversity, but those are the times to revisit our North Stars, our guiding virtues, and hold true to them. Easier said than done, but that is why SEL is so important—for adults and for children—during adversity.

These skills of *everydayship* to which Dr. Elias refers begin with us, as the adults within our school communities. How can we explicitly teach social emotional learning skills to our students or integrate SEL into our school culture if we do not understand, practice, or model the SEL skills that enhance our own social emotional health? The truth of the matter is that we can't, at least not in a way that is authentic. In order to ensure that adult SEL isn't just another educational initiative that passes with the tides of time, I suggest we reframe our thinking by emphasizing the term "social emotional well-being" when referring to adult SEL. As educators, if we focus on our own social emotional well-being as a *way of being*, it becomes meaningful, sustainable, and feasible to integrate into our daily personal and professional lives.

In order to effectively make this transition from adult SEL to social emotional well-being, it is essential to establish a connection to social emotional learning because this is the edifice that most educational entities are using to promote and support the well-being of students and staff alike. This connection begins with a review of the definition and structure that is most widely used and known within our educational system and provides us with a common language and a foundational understanding of the rationale for integrating social emotional learning into our school system in the first place.

By definition, according to the Collaborative of Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020),<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup>"SEL Is . . ." CASEL, Nov. 2020, [casel.org/what-is-sel/](https://casel.org/what-is-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 various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.



**THE CASEL 5:**

The CASEL 5 addresses five broad, interrelated areas of competence and examples for each: *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, *relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making*. The CASEL 5 can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts to articulate what students should know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers.

[www.casel.org/what-is-SEL](http://www.casel.org/what-is-SEL)

As educators, we are aware that when we integrate social emotional learning into the culture of our schools or explicitly teach social emotional learning skills in our classrooms, there can be a positive impact on the entire school community. Research reveals improved student outcomes—academically and in regard to attitudes about self and others—reduced incidence of conduct problems, and decreased emotional distress<sup>2</sup> when we integrate social and emotional learning skills into our classrooms. Students involved in SEL programs with fidelity have demonstrated long-term impact, such as higher graduation rates and college attendance, better rates of employment and economic status, and decreased criminal record and substance abuse problems.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, integration of SEL skills for students and *adults* is paramount in times of adversity and crisis. Specifically, as we have discussed previously, the pandemic placed a spotlight on issues of inequity within the educational system, and mental health and trauma-related issues tend to increase for students, families, and educators in the midst of trials or suffering of any kind. An emphasis on the five competencies of SEL can address these issues by fostering emotional and social connection, healthy and responsible decision-making, and a long overdue call to action to increase social awareness and change behavior in order to advocate for racial and social justice.

All that said, research on the benefits of adult SEL, to date, is not extensive. However, I can attest from my experience as a teacher and administrator that when we as educators practice and model the social emotional learning skills as defined by the CASEL competencies, not only are we better able to teach and set expectations for our students, but we also tend to be more effective and productive ourselves. A more explicit explanation of each competency can be found in my previous book, *Start With the Heart: Igniting Hope in Schools Through Social and Emotional Learning*. I encourage you to access it as a resource if social emotional learning is a relatively new concept to you. Furthermore, each competency as defined by CASEL can be found at <https://casel.org/sel-framework/> for your reference. As we journey through the next section, however, I invite you to explore with me a new Framework for Social Emotional Well-Being.

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<sup>2</sup>J. A. Durlak, R. P. Weissberg, A. B. Dymnicki, R. D. Taylor, and K. Schellinger, 2011, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Raising Healthy Children* 82, no. 1: 402–32.

<sup>3</sup>J. D. Hawkins, R. Kosterman, R. F. Catalano, K. G. Hill and R. D. Abbott, 2005, “Positive Adult Functioning Through Social Development Intervention in Childhood: Long-Term Effects From the Seattle Social Development Project,” *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 159, no. 1: 25–31; S., Aos, R., Lieb, J., Mayfield, M., Miller, and A., Penucci, 2004. *Benefits and Costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.