Efforts to teach Character bring promise and perils
'Social and emotional learning' bundles good sense with some quackery

Aristotle taught his students the importance of managing their emotions. John Dewey, an early 20th-century reformer, sparked the idea that teachers must educate the "whole child". For decades wealthy parents in Britain (and a few other places) sent kids to boarding schools in the hope that they would pick up traits such as independence and resilience. It is not controversial to argue that a young child's first years in education are as much about learning social skills and self-control as about anything else.

Many educators today take enthusiastically to this thinking, under the auspices of "social and emotional learning" (SEL), a term as fuzzy as it is ubiquitous. Proponents of SEL say that teachers could be doing heaps more to instil in youngsters useful attributes such as optimism, empathy and emotional stability. The pandemic supercharged interest in this approach, as educators searched for ways to shore up young teens' lagging social skills or give them techniques for beating the blues. Yet critics see a shiny distraction from the hard graft of academic learning. They worry that all sorts of spurious ideas are riding in on its coat-tails.

The modern business of SEL builds on previous thinking in a number of ways. For one thing, enthusiasts have sought to be more rigorous in defining the non-academic traits which they seek to nurture, and in seeking to measure their growth. In April the OECD—an outfit that for years has carried out international tests in **maths, reading and science**—published data purporting to show which of a dozen or so character traits best predict higher test scores (persistence and curiosity, for example) and which seem good for mental health ("energy" and "trust", to take two). To produce these metrics, analysts sent youngsters in 15 countries surveys seeking to measure these characteristics. The goal is to start making these traits more visible—and, ideally, improvable—in school.
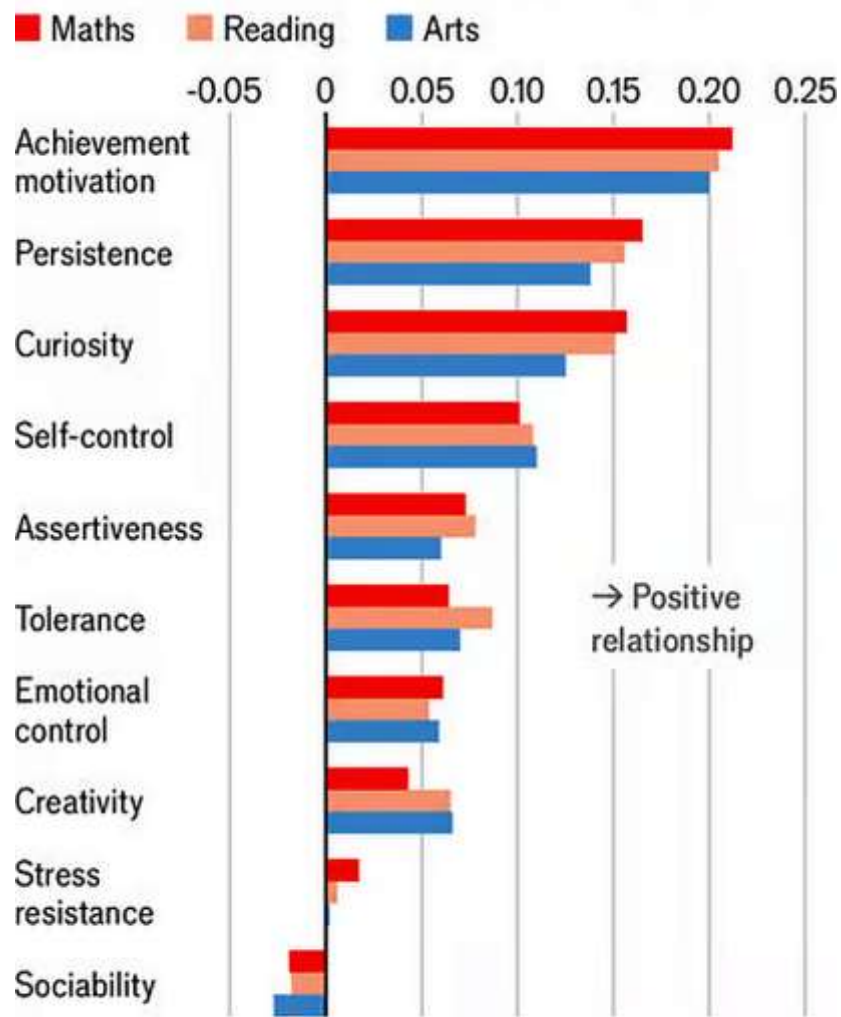
Attitude Adjustments
Relationship between selected social and emotional skills and students' grades *, 2022

Legend: ■ Maths ■ Reading ■ Arts

Scale: -0.05, 0, 0.05, 0.10, 0.15, 0.20, 0.25

Categories (top to bottom): Achievement motivation, Persistence, Curiosity, Self-control, Assertiveness, Tolerance, Emotional control, Creativity, Stress resistance, Sociability

→ Positive relationship

Source: OECD

*Standardised regression coefficients of individual skills on grades, average across sites

chart: the economist

Teachers these days have also grown a lot more likely than their predecessors to try to teach such social and emotional skills through explicit courses of study (rather than seeking only to transmit them through, say,

extracurricular activities or the broader culture of a school). A growing range of commercial curriculums provide lesson plans in service of SEL. The trend is towards programmes that are taught to whole classes, rather than reserved for individual kids with obvious anger-management or self-esteem issues. And older kids are getting this type of instruction now, not just pre-school toddlers and primary-school pupils. Educators have come to realise that "we shouldn't stop promoting these things after a child has turned seven," says Hannah Ulferts of the OECD.

One tantalising promise is that this approach can yield better academic results. The biggest chunk of SEL programmes seek to help kids develop techniques for managing their feelings and getting along better with others. That could improve classroom behaviour, goes the thinking, which would reduce disruptions and enable lessons to go more smoothly. But SEL is just as much about trying to prepare children for challenges that lie far beyond the school gates. Indeed, data from the OECD's various surveys suggest that some cherished traits such as stress-resistance and sociability do not correlate with better grades (see chart), but they do help make for happier youngsters (perhaps such pupils are more inclined to natter than revise).

In America interest in social and emotional learning has grown since 2015, when changes to federal rules permitted states to use non-academic measures when evaluating school performance. A 2017 survey found typical teachers were spending a little under 10% of their working hours planning or delivering social and emotional education of some sort. But enthusiasm has "exploded" since the pandemic, says Justina Schlund of CASEL, a non-profit that promotes SEL.

A contagious idea

In England, 80% of primary schools polled before the pandemic said that they were devoting more time to social and emotional education than they were five years earlier. Nearly half said the difference was large. American spending on SEL rose 45% between 2019 and 2021, according to Tyton Partners, a consultancy. Much of that came from great gobbets of Covid relief money. RAND, a research outfit, found that three-quarters of American schools used some kind of "social and emotional" curriculum in the 2021-22 school year, up about 25 percentage points from 2018.

The costs and benefits of the surge in such teaching are not yet clear, but there are reasons to question whether it is all for the good. Evidence has not supported the grandest claims about how SEL programmes schools can improve outcomes for children. **Defining non-academic attributes is hard, measuring them even harder.** Some prized traits, such as tolerance and sociability, seem more difficult to shape than others. This is often lost in meta-analyses which make bold and overarching claims of success, often by bundling together the results of disparate trials.

A bigger concern is that well-meaning programmes may be having worrisome effects. The hottest debates relate to lessons that aim to teach kids "mindfulness"—a simple form of meditation that can help reduce anxiety. One recent study of a school-based mindfulness programme in Britain found not only that it had no impact on average, but that it may have made some pupils more stressed. One explanation is that this kind of training is encouraging healthy children to start viewing everyday challenges as unbearable trials that can be endured only with the right mental strategies. Alternatively, some kids may not like sitting still.

An unwelcome distraction

All this is meat for those who fear that social and emotional education can become a distraction from academic pursuits. One worry is that schools which repeatedly fail to make children numerate and literate will turn "to the celebration of SEL as a refuge from mediocre academic outcomes", write Rick Hess and Chester Finn, analysts at two right-leaning American think-tanks. Big dollops of this attitude were detectable during the pandemic, when American educators who did not wish to reopen their classrooms sought to play down the impacts of their closure. "It's OK that our babies may not have learned all their times tables," said one union leader in Los Angeles in mid-2021. "They learned resilience. They learned survival."

Efforts to educate the "whole child" can knock academic performance in subtle ways. Enthusiasts sometimes argue for redesigning all lessons in ways that give pupils more opportunities to practise useful behaviours—such as by setting group and project work that require collaboration and grit. But these are not necessarily the best-proven ways to teach, say, science or maths. Some fans use "social and emotional learning" as a woolly synonym for

"protecting children's mental health". Thus children's social and emotional "needs" are increasingly cited as trump cards in debates about how schools should be organised—most commonly when arguing for a more easygoing approach to tests, or homework, or backtalk.

For the movement to thrive, advocates will need to call out "quick-buck artists and frauds" who are jumping on the bandwagon with unproven and esoteric ideas, says Dr Hess. It will mean defining more rigorously what it does and does not aim to achieve. And it will mean committing to research that is "much more systematic, and credible, and feels less like it is in the service of selling SEL". More holistic approaches to schooling could bring real benefits to many children, as Aristotle and Dewey might have supposed. But only if they are led by the head and not the heart. ■

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