

Applied social and emotional learning (SEL) research that fosters quality practice at scale

It is clear from hundreds of controlled studies that well-implemented school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs lead to multiple positive results in both the short and long term. Consistent positive results include improved social and emotional skills and attitudes, enhanced positive and reduced negative behaviors, greater emotional well-being and increased academic achievement (Mahoney *et al.*, 2019). A handbook devoted to SEL integrated outcome research with practice and policy considerations designed to advance the field (Durlak *et al.*, 2015). The Aspen Institute's recent National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's (2019) report, "From a nation at risk to a nation at hope", further synthesizes what is known about learning and what is needed from research, practice, and policy to ensure all children and youth learn and develop the types of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to succeed in school, careers and life.

What would it look like a decade or two from now if the next generation of research took seriously what we have learned about why these competencies are important and that they can indeed be learned and developed intentionally? What if we really shifted more of our research focus from how we prove SEL makes a difference to study more deeply how we can best improve the learning environments, prepare the practitioners, deal with cultural, racial and contextual factors better, and engage children and youth in opportunities where they develop and use these competencies? That is, what if we moved significantly from a prove it or lose it approach in education and accountability to an improve it to move it approach whose goal is to find ways to improve practice in real world settings and doing so at scale – in classrooms, school buildings, districts, communities, statewide and nationally (Weissberg, 2019).

In this commentary, we emphasize what we see as important changes that must occur in the way this next generation of SEL research is conducted, communicated and utilized so that all students benefit from effective SEL programming and practices (see <https://casel.org/>). An excellent place to start is the Aspen Institute's three National Commission resources on research, practice and policy agendas. Here we particularly call attention to the elements of the research agenda that delineate key principles for such research and call for a new research paradigm. Among the principles the Commission notes are these:

- A dynamic, bidirectional relationship between research and practice demands precision.
- Assessment is a tool for continuous improvement and capacity building, not high-stakes accountability.
- Theory of change is the glue that links research and practice; it is a common blueprint to action in both arenas.

These three principles highlight the importance of a new bidirectional relationship with practice; a fundamental change in how data and assessment are primarily used, and



recognition that both research and practice moving forward need to be grounded in common theories of action. These principles come to life with the suggested changes in the paradigms used to conduct research, prioritize questions and disseminate findings.

Of particular relevance here is the call for “next-generation project teams” to be vertical (involving people from multiple levels of research and practice within organizations), multidisciplinary and diverse in ways that bring insights into the lives and cultures of the students and communities. We believe applied research moving forward needs to be done by teams that include practitioners as partners not just subjects and focus on questions of practice driven by a common understanding of what is sought and how we believe we can best get there. With respect to changing the paradigm for the way information is shared and disseminated, the report notes many important changes we encourage readers to review – particularly its recommendations to universities, funders and the larger education ecosystem. To these three areas, we would add the critical need to support practitioners not only in understanding the evidence but also supporting practitioners in the use of data to inform and guide their specific practices – to making data a more useful and central part of practice itself (see <http://measuringsel.casel.org/>).

If the next generation of research and practice move in the directions called for above and by the Commission, we are excited by what can occur. Much more will be learned as we move to a new balance between research that helps us understand ways to improve practice and not just judge its effectiveness – though ultimately both are needed. We can envision a synthesis of this next generation of studies that examines the different impact of how data are used in practice in ways that help practitioners shape the learning experiences of children and youth. Studies that examine the ways training, professional development, coaching incentives, and policy priorities inform and change effective and ineffective SEL efforts. We need more studies where we do not control out the complexities of learning and development but attempt to understand and study them as the heart of what matters – to identify and continuously improve the beneficial evidence-based strategies to implement best practices and quality learning opportunities for all children and youth.

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