MEASURING WHAT MATTERS:
SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING

We have seen a revolution—or perhaps evolution would be a more appropriate term—in educational thinking over the past twenty years. The classical view of the mind, in which reason and emotion are separate and independent, has been replaced by a holistic view in which social, emotional, and cognitive processes are all bound together in a seamless web.[1] Two fundamental principles have emerged from this transformation:

1. Social and emotional competencies are as important as more formal academic skills.
2. Students can learn social and emotional competencies in the same ways that they learn formal academic skills.

Social and emotional learning is critical to students' academic performance and lifelong learning.[2] It follows naturally that measuring student achievement in social and emotional learning is just as important as measuring achievement in formal academic domains, such as literacy and numeracy. Failing to do so leaves students and parents without feedback on student progress in social and emotional learning, and leaves teachers and schools without reliable data on their efforts to foster capacities that students will need throughout their lives.

WHAT IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Five core aspects of socio-emotional functioning are thought to be critical for children's wellbeing and educational attainment: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal relationships, and decision making.[3]

1. SELF-AWARENESS is the ability to recognize and understand our own and others' emotions. It includes knowing our strengths, learning styles, and capacity to succeed in various situations.

Students with a strong sense of self-awareness tend to: demonstrate higher levels of life satisfaction; stay in school longer; and have higher levels of social and

professional success.[4] Students with lower self-awareness tend to show poorer academic performance and a higher incidence of mental health problems and such disorders as aggression, bullying, oppositional defiance, and conduct disorder.[5]

2. SELF-MANAGEMENT refers to the ability to deal with stress and manage emotions. In the school context, self-management includes being able to monitor and manage academic goals and develop personalized learning strategies to master academic material. Self-management also includes: managing anxiety, anger, and depression; and controlling impulses, aggression, and antisocial tendencies. It also involves strategies to address feelings of lethargy.

Strong self-management skills are associated with higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Poor self-management skills are associated with greater risks of emotional and behavioural disorders, health and attentional problems, and poor academic outcomes.[6] Developing stronger self-management skills can lead to large improvements in academic achievement, particularly for students with emotional and behavioural disorders.[7]

3. SOCIAL AWARENESS is the ability to take others' perspectives into account and to empathize. This requires the capacity to understand and predict others' feelings and reactions.[8]

Students with stronger social-awareness skills tend to be more academically competent.[9] Well-developed social awareness is associated with positive social adjustment, reduced bullying, stronger prosocial tendencies, and enhanced emotion regulation.[10] Poorly developed social awareness is associated with higher levels of aggression in adolescents.[11]

4. Competence in INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS involves the ability to: develop and maintain healthy friendships; to address interpersonal conflicts; to resist negative social pressures; to seek help when necessary; and to work well with others.

Students who are competent in interpersonal relationships tend to be more prosocial and cooperative, with higher levels of self-esteem, happiness, and enjoyment of school.[12] Students who score lower on this core competence show higher levels of persistent antisocial behaviour and aggression.[13] Children who get along well with their peers tend to be more academically successful, while those who are rejected by their peers tend to have higher rates of absenteeism and academic failure.[14]

5. Competence in DECISION MAKING involves developing strategies to solve problems (academic, personal, and social); identifying problems when making decisions and generating suitable alternatives. It also involves basing decisions on moral, personal, and ethical standards or recognizing the importance of making responsible decisions.

Responsible decision-making contributes to academic success.[15] Students who develop this competence of been shown to have clear and motivating goals,[16] which help to direct their efforts toward academic success.[17] Students who score low on competent decision making have less capacity to manage stressful events or to address challenges.[18] They also tend to engage in higher levels of antisocial, self-destructive, and socially disordered behavior.[19]

HOW DO SCHOOLS PROMOTE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING?
Many Canadian schools are responding vigorously to both the need and the opportunity to enrich the core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning. When schools promote safe, caring and inclusive school environments, together with anti-bullying and restorative justice practices, they contribute to students' social and emotional learning.

THE INHERENT FEATURES OF SCHOOLING
THAT PROMOTE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING
Students develop social and emotional competencies through their regular interactions with peers, teachers, and school staff inside and outside of the classroom.[20] The rivalries and alliances that students form, the shared interests and conflicts, the experience of working together toward a common goal all contribute naturally to social and emotional learning.[21] These experiences expose students to novel and complex emotions and emotional conflicts that they learn how to manage and resolve on a daily basis.[22]

Acquiring new thinking skills is essential for the development of self-management and decision making, and learning how to deal with the frustration and disappointment of struggling with, and even failing at, academic work contributes to the development of self-awareness and self-management.[23]

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS
The importance of a warm and nurturing teacher in the development of the five core social and emotional competencies cannot be emphasized too strongly. A teacher's constructive feedback is a constant source of development. A teacher's own positive emotional state profoundly influences that of his or her students.[24] Her passion for the material and for helping students maximize their potential helps students learn to monitor and evaluate their own learning and helps them build self-esteem.[25] By breaking a problem down into manageable chunks, drawing attention to salient details, helping a student organize his thoughts, teachers help students plan and sequence their thoughts, and enhance their ability to manage anxiety and frustration and stay focused on a problem.[26]

Teaching that is highly responsive and supportive and treats students as responsible individuals is referred to as "authoritative teaching" and has been shown to boost students' social and emotional development. Authoritative teaching places limits on students, but also encourage their independence. It involves careful explanations of the reasons behind rules and even encouraging students to take an active role in designing these rules. Authoritative teaching tends to be tolerant when students disagree or interject during classroom discussions. It involves paying attention to discipline, but being careful to mete consequences for violations of classroom rules in a fair and consistent manner. Authoritative teaching is effective at producing students that are socially competent and responsible, and, in general, more mature. Authoritative teaching has also been shown to promote positive classroom and school environments, which contributes to both social-emotional and academic learning.[27]

CLASSROOM CLIMATE
Classrooms that are physically and emotionally safe foster student learning while allowing students to develop relationship skills and engage with peers and teachers positively and productively.[28] Features of the classroom climate that contribute to successful learning in general and social/emotional learning in particular include: students receive constructive feedback from their teachers; teachers have high expectations about the material that students are capable of mastering; teachers set appropriate goals and challenges for their students; there are established strategies for helping students to develop a sense of independence and self-efficacy; students see themselves as part of a cohesive and supportive group of peers.[29]

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

In order to augment these natural benefits of the educational experience, more and more schools have introduced Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs into their curriculum. These programs have resulted in significant social/emotional and academic benefits.

The CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROJECT (CDP) is a comprehensive elementary school program developed in California. CDP emphasizes social awareness, interpersonal relationships, and positive development. The program is most effective when it leads to the establishment of a caring community in the school—where students feel valued, connected and responsible to others. Positive outcomes of CDP include reducing anti-social behavior, drug and alcohol consumption, while enhancing reading comprehension and academic achievement test scores.[30]

PROMOTING ALTERNATIVE THINKING STRATEGIES (PATHS) is a social and emotional learning program for children in pre-kindergarten to Grade 6. The program consists of short (20-30 minute) lessons provided in school three times a week. The lessons promotes self and social awareness, self-management, and interpersonal and decision-making skills. PATHS is effective in increasing academic performance and positive social behaviour, improving school climate and emotional attitudes and skills, and decreasing conduct problems and emotional distress.[31] The program is designed for all students to participate, and can be especially effective for students with special needs.[32]

The POSITIVE ACTION PROGRAM (PAP) is designed to focus on and enhance student character and behaviour by teaching how to engage in health promoting behaviours for all areas of the self (physical, intellectual, social, and emotional). There are approximately 140 15-minute lessons per grade, provided by teachers. In addition, there are school-climate, counsellor, community, and family member kits that encourage and reinforce the core SEL competencies. PAP contributes to decreasing anti-social behaviour and improving: school safety; teacher, student and parent involvement; quality student support; and academic achievement.[33]

HOW SHOULD SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING BE MEASURED?

Developing the five core social and emotional competencies is critical to students' success in school and throughout the rest of their lives. Measuring social and emotional learning is key to ensuring that students are developing the social and emotional skills they need and that schools are providing optimal conditions to support social and emotional learning.

There are a number of effective tools for measuring students' social and emotional strengths and for identifying the areas that need to be strengthened. We can begin measuring these competencies in preschool, which not only enables us to promote social/emotional learning at a time when the brain is at its most plastic, but also to intervene early if and when problems are identified. For example, the Preschool Self-Regulation Assessment measures self-regulation in emotional, attentional, and behavioral domains and nicely captures children's emotion regulation and attention/impulsivity. The Early Development Instrument measures five areas (including social competence and emotional maturity) of early child development that are known to be good predictors of adult health, education and social outcomes.

For students of all ages, there are standard measurement tools to identify mental health issues; emotional, social, behavioural and personal identity problems; as well as cognitive and attentional problems. Other tools provide strength-based assessments of the emotional, social and behavioural skills that all students need to succeed in school and in life.

In addition to measuring student progress in social and emotional learning, it is important to assess the effectiveness of classroom and school activities that enhance students'

development of the core social and emotional competencies. A number of standard measurement tools can be used to assess the physical environment, classroom organization, scheduling, discipline and safety, the quality of instruction, interactions among students, teachers, staff and parents, teacher sensitivity and responsiveness, expectations for student achievement, and teacher collaboration and communication.

As important as the three Rs are, today's students must develop the social and emotional capacities necessary for healthy and productive living. Schools play an important part in that developmental process, a process that must be assessed as seriously as any other dimension of learning. Measuring What Matters marks a major step forward in how we understand and meet students' complex needs.

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J.C. Couture, Associate Coordinator, Research, Alberta Teachers' Association

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Kadriye Ercikan, Professor, Measurement, Evaluation and Research Methodology, University of British Columbia

Bruce Ferguson, Professor of Psychiatry, Psychology, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto; Community Health Systems Research Group, SickKids

Joseph Flessa, Associate Professor, Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Joan M. Green, O.Ont., Founding Chief Executive Officer of EQAO, International Education Consultant

Andy Hargreaves, Thomas More Brennan Chair, Lynch School of Education, Boston College

Eunice Eunhee Jang, Associate Professor, Department of Applied Psychology & Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Christopher Kotz, Senior Policy Advisor, Ontario Ministry of Education

Ann Lieberman, Stanford Centre for Opportunity Policy in Education, Professor Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University

John Malloy, Director of Education, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

Roger Martin, Premier's Chair on Competitiveness and Productivity, Director of the Martin Prosperity Institute, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto

Ayasha Mayr Handel, Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Catherine McCullough, former Director of Education, Sudbury Catholic District School Board

Robert Ock, Healthy Active Living Unit, Health Promotion Implementation Branch, Health Promotion Division, Ontario Ministry of Health

Charles Pascal, Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, **Jennifer Riel**, Associate Director, Desautels Centre for Integrative Thinking, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto

Joanne Robinson, Director of Professional Learning, Education Leadership Canada, Ontario Principals' Council

Bruce Rodrigues, Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office

Pasi Sahlberg, Director General, Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation, Finland

Alan Sears, Professor of social studies and citizenship education, University of New Brunswick

Stuart Shanker, Research Professor, Philosophy and Psychology, York University; Director, Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative, York University; Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative

Michel St. Germain, University of Ottawa, Advisors in French-language education

Kate Tilleczek, Professor and Canada Research Chair, Director, Young Lives Research, University of Prince Edward Island

Rena Upitis, Professor of Education, Queen's University

Sue Winton, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, York University and former Early Learning Advisor to the Premier Deputy Minister of Education

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