Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Japan: The Past and the Future

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Abstract: The practice of social and emotional learning (SEL) has emerged predominantly since the 1990s in the context of psycho-education programs. This article briefly traces this trend citing published books on the subject. The Japanese government's policy toward SEL is reviewed, with attention to national curriculum standards and student guidance and counseling manuals. The article goes on to discuss the establishment of the Japan SEL Association in 2024 and the prospect of SEL implementation in Japanese schools, both in terms of research and practice. Two recommendations are made for a system-oriented approach: (1) the clarification of target areas (specific skills/school subjects, official school curriculum areas, and school settings as a whole) in a nested-structure curriculum, and (2) the establishment of evaluation schemes comprising multiple levels.

Key words: social and emotional learning, implementation, system-oriented approaches, school curriculum, evaluation

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has recently become increasingly prevalent in Japan, yet a significant proportion of school teachers and school-related personnel are not yet acquired with the term. The present article has the following objectives: (1) to provide a concise review of the evolution of SEL practice in Japan since the 1990s, drawing primarily on published books that are accessible to practitioners (teachers and educators): (2) to propose strategies that would facilitate studies and practice of the implementation of SEL in the coming decades.

Trends of SEL in Japan

Psycho-education Programs in the 1990s

Psycho-education in the field of education refers to "practical educational activities that apply psychological knowledge and psycho-clinical practices to groups of students enrolled in regular classes (mainly class groups), with the aim of improving the psychological and social health of the students" (Adachi, 2012). Research papers on psycho-education have been published since 1954 (Adachi, 2012), but books on educational programs have only been in print since the 1990s. Some core concepts of these programs are assertion training (e.g., Hiraki, 1993), life skills training (e.g., Kawabata & JKYB Research Group, 1996), social skills training (e.g., Kokubu, Kobayashi, & Aikawa, 1999), stress management learning (e.g., Takenaka, 1997), and structured group encounter (e.g., Kokubu, Kokubu, & Okada, 1997).

These programs are based on psychological theories, and schools have been expected to

implement them autonomously. One exception is the NPO-based Child Assault Prevention program (Child Assault Prevention Project of Women Against Rape, Cooper, & Brittan, 1991), which is conducted by the program staff. The practice of introducing and implementing programs on a commercial basis has been virtually non-existent in Japan.

Introduction of SEL in Japan and Development of SEL

In 1999 the concept of SEL was introduced to Japan by a translated edition of Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators (Elias et al., 1997). The title in Japanese language is "社会性と感情の教育—教育者のためのガイドライン 39—社会性と情動の学習". This publication was the first by major members of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL is a nonprofit organization based in Chicago, Illinois that was formed in 1994 to promote SEL in schools.

In this book SEL is explained as "the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence" (SEC) (p. 2). And SEC is referred to "the ability to understand, manage, and express the social emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development" (p.2). In Acknowledgment section, gratitude is mentioned to the Collaborative for the *Advancement of* Social and Emotional Learning (cf. The italicization has been applied by the author). At the time of this publication, the definition of SEL, the target competences of SEL, and the name of the organization were all in their early stages.
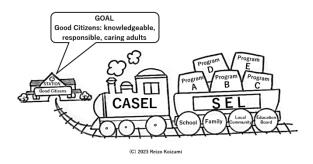
In 2003, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published a booklet (CASEL, 2003) in which the organization's name was changed to the present one. In addition, the definition of SEL was revised to "the process of developing the ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively." The target competence of SEL was explained as the five core SECs: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. It is evident that both SEL (definition and SEC) and CASEL underwent progressive changes during the period from 1997 to 2003.

The most recent definition of SEL is as follows: "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" (CASEL). SEL is virtually indistinguishable from psycho-education in the field of education. A salient distinction between the two, if any, would be that SEL encompasses not only universal programs designed for all children but also targeted programs for children who have specific educational needs. Additionally, SEL programs have a tendency to place more emphasis on emotion than psycho-education programs do.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between SEL, SEL programs, and CASEL could be demonstrated. The objective is to prepare children to become knowledgeable, responsible,

and caring adults. SEL is a framework that encompasses many SEL programs. CASEL emphasizes that these programs should demonstrate scientific evidence of their efficacy.

Figure 1

Relationship between SEL, CASEL, and SEL programs (Koizumi, 2023)

SEL-related publication around 2000 and later

In the context of Japan, there has been a notable proliferation of SEL-related literature in the Japanese language during the 2000s to the present. This development has facilitated increased familiarity among school teachers and school-related personnel with these programs. The following publications are representative of this expansion: Anger Management (Honda, 2002), Mindfulness Program (Imai, 2023), Peer Mediation Program (Ikejima & Takeuchi, 2011), Peer Support Program (Morikawa & Hishida, 2002), Resilience Program (Adachi, Suzuki, & Kuze, 2014), Second Step (NPO Committee for Children Japan, 2011), SEL-8S (Koizumi, 2011), Successful Self (Ando, 2008), Top Self (Yamasaki, 2013), and VLF (Watanabe, 2001). Handbook style books were also published for the purpose of introducing SEL-related practices and reporting on successful cases in Japan (Watanabe & Koizumi, 2022; Yamasaki, 2022).

Although there is evidence of the integration of SEL-related activities and positive outcomes,

further efforts are necessary to ensure the effective implementation of SEL programs in schools (Ikesako & Miyamoto, 2015). A recent review of 85 school-based universal intervention studies on SEL in Japan revealed that these interventions were effective in enhancing social–emotional skills, attitudes toward oneself and others, and positive social behavior, despite the limited magnitude of the observed effects (Takizawa, Bambling, Matsumoto, Ishimoto, & Edirippulige, 2023). To enhance the practical implementation of SEL programs in schools, as well as to conduct research aimed at identifying more effective methods to promote positive changes among children, efforts are necessary. This subject will be addressed in a later discussion.

MEXT policy and publications

The Japanese school system is overseen by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, and special support schools are obligated to adhere to the Government Curriculum Guidelines, which are subject to revision approximately every decade. The Guidelines encompass a range of concepts in SEL, including "zest for life," cooperation, human relationships, empathy, and problem-solving (MEXT, 2017). However, the term "SEL" remains conspicuously absent from the Guidelines. The most pressing challenge at present is to incorporate the concept of SEL into the Guidelines.

In the domain of student counseling and guidance, MEXT promulgated the Student Guidance Guide (version 1) in 2010 (MEXT, 2010). This document explained several SEL programs, including structured group encounter, peer support, social skills training, assertion training, anger management, stress management

education, and life skills education. These programs were situated in the educational counseling section of the Guide as "new methods applicable in educational counseling." The notes indicated that these methods could be implemented in or outside the classroom setting. The positioning of the SEL programs was vague and was only mentioned for the sake of introduction.

The Guide was revised in 2020 (MEXT, 2022), and the term and concept of SEL was introduced in the guidance and counseling section. The description primarily proposes SEL programs as universal programs for all students in the classroom. It can be posited that the recognition of SEL has been advancing in government-related documents.

Establishment of Japan SEL Association

The Japan SEL Research Group was established in 2009 and underwent a transformation to become the Japan SEL Association in 2024, with the expectation of being recognized as a non-profit organization in 2025. In this instance, the focus will be on the potential contributions of the recently established association to the promotion of children's well-being in Japan. The dissemination of SEL implementation in Japanese schools can be facilitated through two avenues: research and practice.

Research

Although meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are regarded as the highest form of evidence, the appropriateness of RCTs for SEL research in educational settings is debatable (Koizumi, 2016). A primary reason for this is the impracticality of eliminating all confounding factors in intervention efforts within schools. For

instance, school principals' leadership, classroom/subject teachers' teaching skills, and teacher-student relationships represent confounding factors that exert a considerable influence on the adoption and execution of intervention programs (independent variables) and students' changes in SEL (dependent variables). Furthermore, ethical concerns arise from withholding potentially beneficial interventions from control groups in educational settings when the control group participants are not provided with preventive treatment sessions following the treatment group sessions.

In the context of contemporary Japan, the author proposes the implementation of controlled trials without randomization or a quasi-experimental design in waitlist control trials. A waitlist control group does not receive the intervention treatment first, but receives the treatment after the treatment group do (e.g., Kimura & Koizumi, 2020). While acknowledging the potential for this design to overestimate intervention effects (Cunningham et al., 2013), the accumulation of evidence through replication with subject groups that are either the same or similar would contribute to the dissemination of SEL programs in Japan.

Practice

In terms of SEL practice, carefully described case studies would help to identify actual local "champions" (cf. Pentz, 2000) among school boards, schools, teachers, and school-related personnel. In a review of intervention reports and review articles, Durlak & DuPre (2008) report as many as 23 contextual factors that influence the implementation of SEL programs. This means that the systems in which children live and grow in everyday life involve multiple, contextual factors. Although case studies have a lower level of

evidence, they can give practitioners a clearer picture of how to begin implementing SEL programs and continue to improve the quality of practice. In order to provide sufficient information to become local "champions," case reports should include a detailed description of the process, the results, and a thorough discussion.

An example that might fall under this case study is Koizumi (2020), which is a report on a public junior high school that implemented and sustained an SEL program for four years. The process of introducing and promoting the SEL program is described based on the idea of Anchor Point Planting (APP). Anchor points are defined as elements of a person-in-environment system that facilitate transactions between the person and the environment (Koizumi, 2000). The APP concept has the potential to be applied to the process of introducing and anchoring a new educational program in various levels of education-related systems (Koizumi, 2016). In the case of a school, the focus is on ten anchor points: These include the form of implementation (whether top-down or bottom-up), principal leadership, coordinators (facilitating faculty), program selection and composition, classroom/grade level trials, curriculum composition and evaluation, school organization, faculty and staff training, preparing the environment (e.g., posters), and cooperation with families. Koizumi (2020) reported outcomes after implementation of the SEL program in terms of student adjustment to school and academic achievement scores. This comprehensive long-term implementation report could offer schools and related personnel interested in prevention efforts a more nuanced understanding of the process and outcomes of SEL programs.

Promotion of SEL in Japan

The author puts forth two issues concerning "curriculum composition and evaluation" among the ten previously identified anchor points, with the objective of promoting the study and practice of SEL in Japan. These issues include the strategic placement of SEL within the school curriculum, which possesses a nested structure, and the development of an evaluation framework. For the successful implementation of SEL, these two issues must be given due consideration in advance in the situation that SEL is not officially located in the Government Curriculum Guidelines.

SEL in the school curriculum

Figure 2 shows the three areas for SEL to produce educational outcomes in the current school curriculum in a nested structure (Koizumi, 2011). Area A indicates the areas in which the goals of instruction are consistent with those of SEL. Most of the SEL programs seem to have been implemented in Special Activities. Period for Integrated Studies could be applicable if students need necessary skills (e.g., interviewing, discussion, cooperation activities) in the preparatory stage before the main learning activities. Moral and Human Rights Education would not be effective without basic skills such as taking another's perspective and responsible decision making, and further SEL is expected to be beneficial for school crisis prevention in this area (cf. Watanabe, 2024). School Subjects include, for example, physical education where stress management education is provided to students for mental health. Special Education has a long history of incorporating social skills education into its curriculum.

In Area B, SEL is used in different parts of a class, such as discussions and group activities. Students' learning would not be smooth or

effective without SEC (Arai, 2024; Frey, Fisher, & Smith, 2019). For example, notes in lesson plans would be described in comment columns such as "recall problem solving skills" and "refer to previously learned anger management skills" in Area B.

The term "Area C" is used to refer to most aspects outside of Government Curriculum Guidelines. This area includes elements such as morning assemblies, recess, and clean-up time, where students have opportunities to apply the skills they have learned in SEL sessions. Teachers and other school personnel can encourage students to practice the SEL skills they have acquired and praise them for reinforcement when they actually use the skills. Both Student Counseling and Guidance and Career Education involve the entire school environment (Areas C), with all efforts focused on the long-term goal.

As illustrated in Table 1, several studies are presented in the aforementioned framework.

Kagawa & Koizumi (2015) and Ito & Koizumi (in press) focused their efforts on Areas A, Area B, and Area C, anticipating an enhancement of the SEC in the broader areas of school settings. A case reported in Elias et al. (1997) was conducted primarily in Area C, although the evaluation of its ultimate effects was measured outside of school. Adachi & Adachi (2019) is an intervention targeting university students, but in this case, the Government Curriculum Guidelines do not apply. However, the objective was to address the university environment that corresponds to Area A and Area C in Figure 2. It is widely acknowledged that the delivery of school education is generally conducted on the basis of a curriculum. In this context, the strategic placement of SEL within this nested structure is of crucial importance in ensuring its effectiveness.
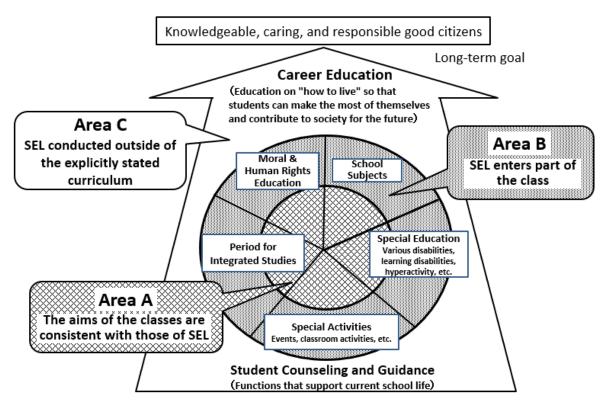
Evaluation issues

In both research and practice, evaluation emerges

Figure 2
Place of SEL programs in school curriculum

Note. Career Education and Student Counseling and Guidance are all relevant to Area A, Area B, and Area C.

as a pivotal concern in the implementation of SEL. As illustrated in Table 1, evaluation can encompass multiple steps in the SEL implementation process, including the assessment of immediate and ultimate effects. When the measures of immediate effects encompass students' achievement levels in each SEL session, such as the accuracy of steps in role-playing (Elias et al., 1997), they contribute to ensuring the fidelity of implementation. For instance, students' self-assessment of their comprehension of the target skills, their self-efficacy in applying the skills they have acquired, and their motivation to utilize the skills in their daily lives serve as

significant indicators of the level of achievement in a session (cf. Kuromizu & Koizumi, 2020). These types of measures also play an important role in teachers' reflection on their teaching practice as well as the level of achievement in each session.

As previously stated, school subjects related to SEL are not explicitly described in the Government Curriculum Guidelines, and SEL programs are required to "merge into" school curriculum. Absent definite evaluation procedures as well as clear goals, SEL efforts would not be able to contribute to school education.

Table 1
SEL in curriculum and evaluation in several studies

Target group	·Elementary school students	·Middle/junior high school students	·Senior high school students (Grade 10)	·University students (First year)
Goals and desired outcome	·Increasing social and emotional competence (SEC) and attitude toward learning	·Increasing peer and social relationships	·Increasing school adjustment	·Supporting adjusting to university life and establishment of their identity
Curriculum Area A	·SEL-8S program	——	·SEL-8C program	·Assertion training
Area B	·School events, Moral Education etc.	——	·School events and issues	——
Area C	·"Challenging week" ·Posters, SEL-8S Corner	·Role-playing exercises (at the beginning of each day)	·Posters, digital display at the entrance	·Reflection report
Evaluation Immediate (or direct) effects of SEL	·SEC (student's self-evaluation, teachers' evaluation)	·Average accuracy of mastered steps in the role-playing (student's self-evaluation)	·SEC ·Normative behavior ·Adaptation to learning (student' self-evaluation)	·Assertion behavior ·Respect for others, ·Perspective taking ·Expression of anger (student' self-evaluation)
Ultimate effects of SEL	·Attitude toward learning (student's self-evaluation) ·Learning retention tests: Japanese language, math, Kanji	·The average number of student interactions outside the school (student logs)	·Absence rate ·Number of students quitting school or transferring to another school	·Subjective adjustment ·Identity ·Self-acceptance (student' self-evaluation)
Reference	Kagawa & Koizumi (2015)	Elias et al. (1997) (p.107)	Ito & Koizumi (in press)	Adachi & Adachi (2019)

Note. Curriculum Area A, Area B, Area C indicate those shown in Figure 2.

System-oriented approaches

The school environment is a nested structure in terms of school curriculum, as illustrated in Figure 2. In the implementation of SEL, this feature is one of the important points that researchers or teachers/school-related personnel should take into consideration. In order to facilitate the implementation process, two key questions should be considered: (1) which Areas are the targets in Figure 2 and (2) how the effects are evaluated along the time axis (e.g., immediate and ultimate). The initial inquiry pertains to the objectives of the SEL implementation, and the selection of the target domains is contingent upon these three choices: specific skills and school subjects (e.g., Area A), school curriculum areas (Area A & B), or school settings as a whole (Area C including Area A & B). The subsequent inquiry is oriented towards the development of a persuasive evaluation plan, aimed at effectively communicating the outcomes to other researchers and educators. The author hypothesizes that the articulation of these two inquiries will contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of SEL implementation.

A notable limitation of the present article is its omission of discussion of other nine anchor points out of ten in the APP approach in Koizumi (2016), as well as of the environments including families and local communities. Furthermore, other environments, such as preschool and out-of-school facilities, are not addressed. It is evident that there are numerous issues to be addressed in future research.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

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