Towards a perfect universal educational curriculum

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Abstract

In the process of reforming education, it has become no longer possible to discuss pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, academic achievement, or the culture and climate of schools without discussing social-emotional competencies under the framework of social and emotional learning. This paper attempted to explore some of the complications within the building and implementing an educational curriculum. The study discusses educational pedagogy in the existing literature. Based on the findings, education requires more dedicated and school-specific reflection into where things go wrong. Due to the broad range of skills and unfurling neuroscience behind emotional intelligence, it can be proposed that a lack of ownership of these competencies is assisting in a dilution through local authority principles/governments/education boards and to a loosely based school-level approach through individual teachers with little guidance or support.

Keywords: COVID-19, emotional competencies, emotional learning, neuroscience, pedagogy;

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1. Introduction

In the process of reforming education, it has become no longer possible to discuss pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, academic achievement, or the culture and climate of schools without discussing social-emotional competencies under the framework of social and emotional learning (SEL). This fad, as it is sometimes perceived, encompasses the process through which individuals attain and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to manage their emotions, understand others' perspectives and show empathy for others, set and achieve positive goals, develop and sustain positive relationships and make responsible decisions (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2010; Lawlor, 2016).

Due to the broad range of skills and unfurling neuroscience behind emotional intelligence (EQ), it can be proposed that a lack of ownership of these competencies is assisting in a dilution through local authority principles/governments/education boards and to a loosely based school-level approach through individual teachers with little guidance or support.

1.1. Purpose of study

The intersectionality of social, cultural, and political framing in universal education has started to become oversimplified, and misconstrued aims have led to battles of methodology and facile prescriptions, especially since COVID-19, being quickly delivered one after another to schools in the form of curriculum. This paper suggests that rather than completely replacing one idea with a new one, it must be accepted that there is not, nor will there ever be a perfect universal educational curriculum. We can only continue to strive towards improvement. Education is not a science; schools need to establish their core values to provide a model framework that can be critically reflected upon to sustainably progress into the modern world.

2. Results

First, attempting to treat education as science is doing it an injustice. Science is typically evidence-based research using data, possibly randomised, but collected and then theorised around to find out what works. Classrooms, on the other hand, are vastly complex. People are fallible. Multifarious situations that are ever present within human behaviour, make it extremely more difficult to predict outcomes or reactions to discreet significant changes. The typical quantitative research method of null-hypothesis testing (being true until proven wrong) that social scientists in humanities tend to fall back on, brings up a plethora of problems too. Variations in statistics, and of people, can be dangerous.

In the business world, business models often rely heavily on examples rather than definitions as in education. Learning by example can help solidify the claim that education is not a science, and it can also bring forward the proposal that life-long learning holds significant value. Biesta (2010) coherently outlines the case that education is value-based and that expectations set from previous work should be challenged. Collecting evidence of all the effects surrounding various pedagogies in a variety of situations can, however, put us in better stead to view the alternatives.

Neuroscientists like Badre (2021) are working towards understanding cognitive control and how we bridge the gap between knowledge and action. These rules are very important to understand so that we can better comprehend the complications that are involved in knowledge acquisition and how we function not only in our daily lives for survival and preservation, but also as living, breathing organisms in a classroom, a society, and an evolving world. According to the educational neuroscientist Sprenger (2020, p. 6), we should 'celebrate…social-emotional learning elicits brain responses appropriate to experience'. Neuroscience researchers have found areas and chemicals in the brain that respond to certain learning strategies. The lag of scientific understanding is finally being filtered into mainstream media and education with terms such as happy hormones

and growth mindset becoming popular (Badre, 2021; Dweck, 2015; Fleming, 2022). While it can be beneficial for us to understand these functions, because they are being presented as simplistic divisions of the brain, it can be fundamentally problematic. Neuroscientist Tucker (2007, p. 179) explains there are no cognitive modules in the brain. Instead, there are '…amazing intricate networks, each embedded within the other and each linked to its neighbour'.

Educational neuroscience can and should be utilised to support and enhance classroom practices, but these structures and systems should not be expected to fix or to even produce the predicted outcomes in every classroom. We have long since known that humans are far too complex for that, there is a certain spontaneity of action that occurs within classrooms (Bain, 1878). The three main models of EQ researched by Salovey (2011), Goleman (1995) and Petrides, Pita, and Kokkinaki (2007) are the ability model, the mixed model, and the trait model. There is a mix of these works found in the frameworks adopted by policymakers around the globe and taken on as national and humanistic values under the umbrella terms of SEL or social emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) in the United Kingdom or collaborative for academic, social, emotional learning (CASEL) in the United States. We can take advantage of the epistemological perspective of SEL competencies to navigate the complexities of new neuroscience but we must also remember that teaching cannot solely be a research-based profession because individual classrooms are far too complex (Claxton, 2021; Wiliam, 2019). A scientific theory should be used as an aid to the awareness and compassion required to apply to the discernment that intelligence, emotional or otherwise, is not enough, then we can build on a better confluent theory.

To next consider what is meant by core values, we need to establish a larger context that the educational environment exists within. Neuroscience is supporting the EQ in SEL and now a critical race theory lens is being utilised to address issues of equity (McGee, Germany, Phillips, & Barros-Lane, 2021). SEL is not only about teaching and EQ skills, but it is also about learning conditions and the society and environments encompassing that. Education can be a tool for many things including, but not limited to, empowerment and social justice. Developing a society where being different is not a disadvantage, where curiosity and intrigue should be exciting and not a bore is crucial in the current climate.

Neoliberalist and conservative frameworks do not consider core human values, and these values although diverse, most certainly are, valid. In education, the upshot of neoliberal discourse has been to ignore the problems faced by public schools and to promote market solutions through private schools, vouchers, crams, charter schools, etc. (Blakely, 2007). Perhaps even SEL competencies were initially and still are, seen by some critical theorists in this light. Currently, the state of Indiana is bidding to cease the use of CASEL within their schools, possibly to do with political factors, rather than educational (Washburn, 2022). Conceptual conservatism of an economic-determinist perspective: education leads to skills, skills lead to employment, employment leads to economic growth; regards education (and training) simply as an instrument of economic growth. This perspective, as is still widely seen in Japan, certainly needs reform and has caused widespread stress and anxiety as education takes the blame for, amongst other things, economic downfall.

According to Foreman (as cited in Sprenger, 2020), the antidote to stress is trust. We need to figure out what the key human values are so that we can all base our trust. The American philosopher John Dewy (1954 as cited in Greene, 1988) claimed that the articulate public lacked a sense of shared values and norms. Having a framework or school motto to return to in times of doubt will guide any school or struggling learner back on the journey of development. If the core value of the school environment is not set, it will be difficult for any school to flourish. If the school's motto is out of date, it is up to the school to establish a slogan, or set of competencies, that the whole school can get on board with. Whether this motto, slogan or competence-establishing values motivate or hinder is worth exploring. Perhaps it is reinforcing the neoliberalist vision of education,

and timely discussion of this worldwide impact continues to grow (Bleazby, 2017). These discussions and research need to continue before radical action is taken to understand what has been successful and why (Claxton, 2021). With monitoring and stewardship, a balance can be built to provide preventative and accountable systems for a more personable and meaningful education.

Providing an environment that is both safe and empowering is one of the key SEL competencies found across multiple policies under the current SEL trend. These competencies can become frameworks of school core values. Differing SEL competencies are depending on which researcher or practitioner is followed. Quite often, government bodies outsource policy challenges to organisations, and corporations such as 6 seconds (n.d.) and Rand (n.d.). Six seconds focus' on three important pursuits; know yourself, choose yourself, and give yourself. This EQ assessment begins like Salovey and Mayer's ability model (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and then develops in recognition of Goleman's theory of EQ (Goleman, 1995) into eight measurable skills: emotional literacy, recognising behavioural patterns, applying consequential thinking, navigating emotions, engaging intrinsic motivation, exercising optimism, increasing empathy, and pursuing noble goals.

The UK government subsidised SEAL to follow Goleman's (1995) model of EQ, using the domains of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills to guide their values (UK government, social mobility commission, 2011). It is assumed that SEAL schools are all doing similar things (Humphrey et al., 2010). In the US, CASEL, also supports five interrelated areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. It can be anticipated, what key core values at a school level might be from these principles.

Nationality, culture, and personal identity can greatly influence core values. On a personal level, these may be kindness, intelligence, intuition, and imagination. On a school level, these may fringe the SEL competencies but may look more like respect, sportsmanship or humility, responsibility, and/or loyalty. Institutions should be expanding courses that are ontologically in balance with their core fundamental values. These can help promote teaching techniques that create, investigate, utilise, and promote specific assessments to develop not only students' lives but also encourage all institution members into becoming better progressive citizens of the world.

To foster awareness, curiosity, and discoveries, critical reflective practice can prevent learning from ending too soon (Horton-Deutsch & Sherwood, 2017). Critical reflection is modelling responsible decision-making and being accountable for the values the institution is trying to establish. Having a set practice to follow will guide staff and onlookers and enable accountability when required. Reflection provides time for careful consideration of the challenges faced, time to contemplate the causes, and to postulate the solutions, it is deliberate and intentional (Reale, 2017). If the community of the institution can spend time on collaborative reflection, it can work towards building stronger relationships with peers. Voices of varied perspectives and experiences can be shared, and advice sought in a desire to succeed.

It should be worth noting that mandatory collaboration can occasionally lead to unavoidable micro-political agendas. Dewy (as cited in Bleazby, 2017) would agree that reflection is an important part of the learning process and with continued practice, these agendas could be addressed appropriately. Reflective thinking is multifaceted. Educators require the empowerment of practical tools to challenge one another's assumptions to improve learning (Brookfield, 2017). With this courage and reflective practice, teachers and establishments are more equipped to reach their full potential.

Challenging perspectives can dynamically engage critical thinking skills that manage the complex rhythms of diversity. There are not enough experts available to guide this process, so schools must invest in their staff to provide cohort-based, ongoing professional development

experiences that will in turn provide continuous support. By sharing individual experiences and opening your practice to your colleagues' perceptions, practicing critical reflection can aid in understanding and management of the dynamics within your classroom and institution. Individual commitment to a group effort can help an institution and society and civilisation work (Lombardi as cited in Reale, 2017). The momentum of courageously debating philosophies behind actions is creativity at its finest. Reflection is the bridge between theory and practice and can pave the way for transformative learning (Mezirow as cited in Reale, 2017). As Cohen (2014) nicely puts it, people should get comfortable with the uncomfortable. This is the intentional critical reflection that can transcend into the change we need.

This paper has attempted to explore some of the complications of building and implementing an educational curriculum. The fact that educational research and other humanity field discoveries are limited in the style of both the presentation and methodology of research is only just on the brink of change. Neuroscience is encouraging more exploration into the emotional senses and how the relationships of cognitive control are important to understand. It must also be understood that any benefits that arise, probably come with a cost. Most tasks are opportunity-based and the independence and freedom that arises can affect the long-term consequences such as to the nervous system or with depression or other no-go bias (Cohen, 2014).

Life requires learning from experience. Education requires more dedicated and school-specific reflection into where things go wrong. The idea that highly intensive fine and gross motor skills should be developed as quickly as possible, and those social skills should be reinforced eternally is not necessarily a radical idea. It is however something that seems to have been left unattended or assessed in a while. Improvements in teacher health, teacher well-being, and teacher training in SEL competencies and advanced technology, all require upkeep. It is this resolve that the revolution is heading towards. One that is striving to enhance mobility in all aspects, is supportive of others and is not forced to compete.

3. Conclusion

Power differentiations created by social, cultural, and political boundaries must be overcome and efforts to pursue new theories to end oppression through education is only one battle of a much larger war. Progression requires full school support. Conversations and lifelong learning need to be in continual practice to aim towards more institutional understanding and a basic acknowledgment of emotions being present in decisions.

Institutions need to bring emotional awareness into society to keep society progressing with the momentum of globalisation, not to overshadow academic practice, but to provide the balance it needs for sustainable survival. Education is not a science, but it should be valued as such.

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