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# Social Emotional Learning

## What it is and why it matters

Jenny Williams

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), originating in the United States, defines Social Emotional Learning or SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” (CASEL.org, 2017)

There are many excellent resources for schools in Australia on the topic of Social Emotional Learning, for example, the Kids Matter project which has been in schools for over 10 years, has a framework that helps schools support students’ wellbeing and mental health. Their framework is structured on four components: positive school community, social and emotional learning for students, working with parents and carers and helping children with mental health difficulties. (Kids Matter, 2017)

The teachings in Social Emotional Learning underpin the guiding principles of the Safe Schools Framework that emphasise the importance of student safety and wellbeing for effective learning at school.

- **Affirm** the rights of all members of the school community to feel safe and be safe at school
- **Acknowledge** that being safe and supported at school is essential for student wellbeing and effective learning
- **Accept** responsibility for developing and sustaining safe and supportive learning and teaching communities that also fulfill the school’s child protection responsibilities
- **Encourage** the active participation of all school community members in developing and maintaining a safe school community where diversity is valued
- **Actively** support young people to develop

understanding and skills to keep themselves and others safe

- **Commit** to developing a safe school community through a whole-school and evidence-based approach (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Our Australian Curriculum also highlights the importance of social and emotional learning in its charter where it notes that our Curriculum is designed to help “students become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.” (Department of Education and Training, 2016)

The evidence is clear that Social Emotional Learning does have a positive impact on students’ wellbeing and academic success. There is a steady momentum building in Australia around the SEL movement with the goal to continue to build momentum to ensure all schools have an SEL framework embedded within their school to set children up for lifelong success. Many examples of strong SEL are emerging from schools and systems around Australia.

This article describes a framework that began over 20 years ago and is now gaining recognition and results in several states and school systems. Originally based at Yale, CASEL moved to the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1996 and in 2001, the board changed the name to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning to reflect the new research in the



field and to ensure that academics were a part of the conversation (Edutopia, 2011).

CASEL started its research into the SEL area in 1994. Their goal was to create first class, evidence-based Social and Emotional Learning and implement it into schools. To be emotionally intelligent and have the skill to read other people’s moods and emotions is a skill that can be taught. Therefore, CASEL researchers believe, like many other educators and scholars in this area of SEL research and practice, SEL needs to be taught in schools.

CASEL outlines Five Core Competencies for Social-Emotional Learning:

- Self-Awareness**
- Self-Management**
- Social Awareness**
- Relationship Skills**
- Responsible Decision Making**

CASEL and their collaborators broke new ground in 2011 after releasing a meta-analysis of 213 social and emotional learning programs which demonstrated positive impacts of Social Emotional Learning. In 2017, they followed this up with a further meta-analysis in which they analysed the results from 82 different SEL programs involving more than 97,000 students from kindergarten to high school. CASEL highlighted some of the results from the research as outlined below.



They noted that, 3.5 years after the last intervention, the academic performance of students exposed to SEL programs was on average 13 percentile points higher than their non-SEL peers, based on the eight studies that measured academic performance. At other follow-up periods, behaviour problems, emotional distress, and drug use were all significantly lower for students exposed to SEL programs, and the development of social and emotional skills and positive attitudes toward self, others, and school was

higher (CASEL, 2017).

The not-for-profit Foundation for Young Australians produced its The New Basics Report which was delivered to schools and principals this year. The report looked at a range of 'big data' sources to help understand the economic and social conditions affecting Australian young people today and into the future. The Report highlighted the importance of teaching enterprise skills to students from primary school through to secondary school. These skills include: problem solving, communication skills, digital literacy, teamwork, presentation skills, critical thinking, creativity and financial literacy. The report found that over a three-year period of analysing job vacancy advertisements from over 6,000 sources the proportion of jobs that directly cited the need for critical thinking increased by 158 per cent, creativity increased by 65 per cent, and the requirements for presentation skills had increased by 25 per cent while proficiency in team work rose by 19 per cent. Interestingly, CASEL's five core competencies outlined and specifically taught in their SEL sets the basis for instilling these enterprise skills (Foundation for Young Australians, 2017).

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), whose goal is to source quality, evidence-based information and resources to support those who work with children, families and communities in the welfare sectors, have funded several organisations across Australia to implement the Second Step Program in the communities and schools they are working with. (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017).

The Australian and New Zealand partner of the Second Step Program, Positive Pieces Education trialed this global program (currently used in 70 countries) with Australian schools and Educators in 2014. Feedback received from trial participants confirmed that Second Step not only meets CASEL's five core competencies and is aligned with the Australian Curriculum, but also explicitly teaches empathy, an important part of social awareness. Their feedback guided the Australian adaptation of this well-researched, classroom-based program designed to decrease problem behaviours, increase students' school success and promote social-emotional competence and self-regulation.

NSW Education & Communities as part of their commitment to supporting the wellbeing of students has incorporated SEL into their Wellbeing Framework. The framework outlines its goals **"to support... students to connect, succeed and thrive at each stage of their development and learning; to provide opportunities that are age appropriate, rigorous, meaningful and dignified; and to do this in the context of individual and shared responsibility underpinned by productive relationships that support students to learn."** (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2015).

Since May 2015, Positive Pieces Education, a not-for-profit organization based in Australia, has provided professional development to educators and has supported implementation of Second Step resources into schools across Australia and New Zealand.

## Biography

Jenny Williams, Founder of Positive Pieces Education has a comprehensive background in Social Emotional Learning and has worked with educators, students and parents for over 20 years.

In 2014, Positive Pieces was established to bring to the Australian and New Zealand school communities contemporary, evidence-based programs and educational resources that support children's well-being and learning, providing valuable resources to educators and parents. Positive Pieces Education is a Not-for-Profit organisation with a mission to influence the social and emotional well-being of children, teachers and parents in Australia and New Zealand.

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