

HELPING OR HINDERING EACH OTHER: SOME NUANCED PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a broad and very popular topic in research. Within SEL, there are five interconnected components that must be understood to help each of us achieve a higher degree of self-awareness and improved interpersonal relationship with our fellow human beings. Some of the SEL behaviors discussed in this paper, though, are not always what they appear to be. These behaviors may be traumagenic in nature so an element of manipulation may be present unbeknownst to the other person in the conversation. Additionally, elements of social emotional learning can be used with doctoral candidates to help combat the disturbingly high attrition rates. In light of SEL, through an understanding of the AREA acronym, we faculty members, can also explore ways to help doctoral candidates succeed in their studies thereby helping to reduce attrition rates.

Keywords: social emotional learning, doctoral learners, anxiety, attrition, AREA acronym

Social and emotional learning (SEL) seems to be a popular topic (London et al., 2023) in education. Though, to be honest, at its base, SEL seems to offer people the valuable skills and techniques needed to be healthy, happy, and properly interacting adults in all walks of life not just in education. All too often, sadly, people are not always able to demonstrate and develop emotional awareness and skills to manage emotions and behaviors and express them appropriately; communicate effectively with others; develop positive relationships; feel and express empathy and compassion for others; and make good decisions based on values, impact, and concern for the long-term well-being of one's self and others. (Keene, 2024, para. 1)

Given the anxiety and stress present so many local, national, and international environments, it seems valuable to explore social and emotional learning in light of what we, as human beings, can learn and how we can develop these healthy skills further. And, if these skills can be developed early in life, great benefits (Greenberg, 2023; Putnam, 2024) can follow. These healthy skills can, as will be shown later in this paper, help a group of people achieve their educational dreams.

By way of a starting point, there is value in understanding what the five core components of SEL are. According to Mesinas and Vasanova (2023), five competencies exist in SEL: “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making” (p. 123). Each of the five parts will be discussed in turn along with any potential issues that might be present for some of the components.

Understanding the SEL Components

Before understanding why and how SEL can be helpful to everyone, there is value in talking about each of its five elements in a nuanced manner. By exploring these principles in this manner, it will become clear that some of these elements may have their roots in psychological and/or emotional concerns that may or may not be consciously evident during the interpersonal interaction. Here is a discussion of each of the five components in turn.

Self-awareness

Through self-awareness, we, as humans, demonstrate how we understand ourselves. This understanding includes our “emotions, thoughts, and values” (“What is the CASEL framework?,” n.d., Section 2). Such an awareness extends to our environment, community, and culture as well (Rhee & Sigler, 2024). Additionally, self-efficacy comes into play when discussing self-awareness because without being aware of oneself and one’s own behaviors, the resulting actions and beliefs may be affected. Thus, intertwined with our beliefs that we can do something is our own awareness. Such a multidimensional perspective (London et al., 2023; Rhee & Sigler, 2024) is important and also raises potential concerns and questions because while self-awareness and self-efficacy are connected, that is not always the case. Such a disconnection can result in confusion and turmoil. The following two scenarios highlight some of these issues.

In the first situation, a young boy of 11 or 12 years old has an orthodontic overbite and is picked on in school. Students call him names and teachers do not intervene. He reacts by yelling and crying. From an SEL perspective, one may wonder what trauma he experienced at an even younger age to cause negative outbursts and emotions. And, tangentially, why does name-calling affect his core being so deeply? In this example, the boy is not yet fully self-aware and cannot understand why he feels highly triggered by the name calling.

In the second situation, an adult is watching a television program and starts to cry without understanding why. There may be many reasons to explain such an issue. If a person is autistic, then the person may present with interoception—the inability to sense and perceive one’s internal state—and possibly alexithymia—the inability to describe emotions may be present. According to Shah et al. (2016), with an impaired interoception, alexithymia may co-occur causing “emotional signals not [to be] perceived and thus not integrated into decision-making” (Abstract). Given a potential “neurological and developmental disorder” (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d., para. 1), one may very well ask how this person could demonstrate proper self-awareness and what techniques are required to do so.

To connect healthy social and emotional learning and autism, though, may be a stretch and certainly outside the scope of this research. However, there are potentially many situations where there is a lack or reduced sense of recognizing and understanding one’s own emotions. In such scenarios, one might ask how a person could learn to exhibit self-awareness and, perhaps more pointedly, whether a person can regulate their social and emotional learning when the etiology is potentially beyond their control. The answer may lie in understanding the behaviors on a deeper level.

Self-management

Self-management is how people control their “emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations” (“What is the CASEL framework?,” n.d., Section 2) to achieve certain desired goals. Additionally, within this category is also how stress and anxiety are managed and handled. Self-management, as an element of SEL, is perhaps more “internal” than the other components. How a person controls their emotions and behaviors well is dependent on a number of factors of which two are personal ability and cultural upbringing and societal norms or expectations. Each will be explored in turn.

At a basic level, personal ability involves being aware of one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors and then understanding that how they are outwardly presented might not result in the desired goals. To know when to demonstrate self-restraint and when not to requires self- and social-awareness as well as relationship skills.

The concept of social upbringing and norms comes into play when one considers how people from New York City versus Atlanta (or any other city in the southern United States) typically interact with one another. There is a common belief that New Yorkers are rude and brusque (Mills, 2013) and will speak their minds freely. The reader is now asked to compare that belief with the famous Southern euphemism “bless your heart” (Brooks & Tollison, 2021, p. 30) where, unless a person comes from or grew up in the southern part of the United States, the intended meaning may not be misunderstood. A true Southerner would never say bluntly what is meant or felt and a native New Yorker would not easily be able to restrain from speaking their mind.

Given the New York City mentality (i.e., hustle-bustle, speak-your-mind and move on because there’s little time for anything else), one may believe that such behavior feeds off itself as it is accepted and acceptable in that environment. Such a behavior may be thought of as caused by society or societogenic).

Self-management may be viewed with a slight modification of the see-judge-act model (Stouten et al., 2019) where a person sees something, judges whether the behavior is “counternormative and intentional” (Stouten et al., 2019, p. 325), and then acts. Explained a bit differently, with self-management, a person needs to hear what is said and understand its associated emotion, judge the statement and emotion, and then either react or demonstrate self-restraint. Sometimes, self-management (also known as agency) is difficult if the person has a traumatic history and is not able to control their sentiments, thoughts, and/or actions well enough in different situations (“What is the CASEL framework?,” n.d.) to accomplish certain desired goals.

Social awareness

At this point in the discussion of social emotional learning, a shift exists from the self to the interaction with others. This shift is of great importance because, as Amer and Obradovic (2022) stated, “At the core of what makes humans, and their behaviour, social, is the interplay between self and other” (p. 551). Social awareness and how each of us interacts with one another is needed to obtain success not only in professional settings (Kearney et al., 2024) but also throughout our lives. None of us can exist in life without other people. Additionally, Eddy (2022) stated that “self-other distinction refers to the ability to distinguish between our own

and other people's physical and mental states" (para. 1). Only with psycho-social cognitive development would a person be able to understand the self-versus the other.

The element of social awareness also refers to how empathy and ability enable us to connect with other people including those who are different from us. But, social awareness is not just mere interaction with other people, it is also an "understanding [of] how what's happening around us can influence us and how we create and feel a sense of belonging" (CASEL, n.d., p. 4). Given how complex this element is, there is value in deconstructing it to gain a deeper understanding of its significance.

One can start with the word empathy: "an emotional state triggered by another's emotional state or situation, in which one feels what the other feels or would normally be expected to feel in his situation" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 440). As clear as this definition may be, the word "trigger" is important to discuss because in being empathetic towards another person, one's own traumatic experiences may be triggered thereby resulting in a traumagenic response which could prevent the person from fully addressing (social and emotional) needs of the other person and, tangentially, feeling empathy. Hoffman (1990) referred to this experience as "vicarious trauma" (p. 443) or empathetic distress (Robinson, 2008) where one person takes on, and is triggered by, the emotional distress of another person (Smith, 2015)

Next, the idea of people "who are different from us" is important. "Race is often ignored as a core component of social and emotional competency (SEC) and social and emotional learning (SEL)" (Humphries & McKay-Jackson, 2022, p. 7). Sadly, stereotypes which lead to actual or perceived discrimination are present in society. One needs to have "respect for each other" (Putnam, 2024, p. 27) starting with dispelling any racist or stereotypical comments or thoughts that may exist. Sadly, that is easier said than done in some societies. According to Lea et al. (2022), racism and mental health are "based on White middle class [sic] values" (p. 2023). The authors explained that other scholars had pointed out that SEL strategies often reflect white, cisgender, patriarchal norms and values that further enact emotional and psychological violence onto Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ youth of color [because these people must] manage and regulate themselves and their emotions, conform and constrict their identifies, and not express their fullest, most authentic selves. (Kaler-Jones, 2020, para. 2; (Lea et al., 2022)

When people are forced to conform to what may incorrectly be required in society and hide their true selves, problems like mental illness, racism, bigotry, and prejudice exist. This statement is extremely significant.

From a broader non-race or non-gender-related perspective, one must consider people who are neurodivergent and how SEL may adversely affect them. Depending on the specific etiology and whether a person has endured a traumatic past, social awareness, along with self-awareness, may be limited and potentially beyond that person's ability. For example, with respect to people who may be or feel that they may be on the autism spectrum, not understanding why they do not fit in in society can be valuable with respect to social awareness. Being understood in spite of seeing the world differently is valuable so they may no longer feel like outsiders in society.

Regardless of the situation, every human being wants and needs to feel safe, heard, and validated. Social awareness means an understanding of one's own behaviors and emotions as

well as the behaviors and emotions of other people (Baumsteiger et al., 2022). When trauma comes into play, a person may not fully understand their emotions or behaviors; these people may be (externally) forced to behave in a way that exacerbates a reduction in social emotional learning. A case in point is that a person may be told to behave in a certain way so as to fit in with that society and that behavior goes against the heretofore undiagnosed natural autistic tendency. What ensues is cognitive and emotional conflict and the person may not understand why. This lack of understanding significantly impede social awareness.

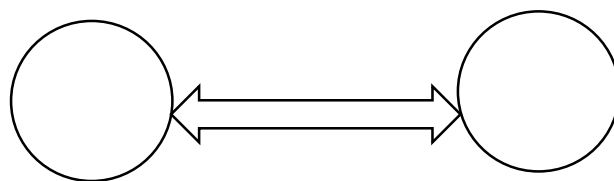
In dealing with social and emotional learning, then, one is advised to take a “color-blind ideology approach” (Humphries & McKay-Jackson, 2022, p. 8) where a person is a person and there must be acceptance of their behaviors, cultural practices, values, and experiences to promote mental and behavioral health and wellness (Wilken et al., 2024).

Relationship skills

The concept of relationship skills, connected to social awareness and self-management, refers to how people interact with each other. For example, if a person handles conflicts in a brusque, you-are-wrong-period manner, then there it is easy to see how there may be issues with self-management and social awareness. Relationship skills and interpersonal connections are demonstrated by how we humans effectively communicate and negotiate with other people and with groups of people (“What is the CASEL framework?,” n.d.). These points will be made clearer shortly.

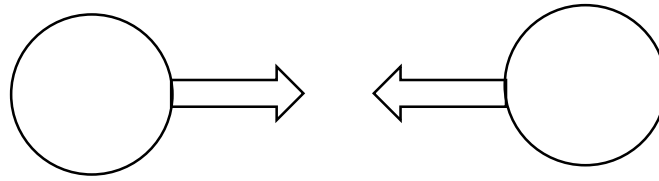
From a different perspective, one may deconstruct 3 interconnected elements in the component of relationship skills: the two speakers (as shown in Figure 2 by the 2 circles) and the message (shown by the bidirectional arrow) which is connected to the 2 interlocutors showing a healthy communication pipeline where a message sent and received without concern (Chametzky, 20190. When communication is clear, things are wonderful.

Figure 1 Healthy Communication



Though an open line of communication between interlocutors is always desired, it does not always occur. If there is a communication breakdown, then the pipeline is broken as evidenced by the 2 arrows not touching one another (see Figure 2). Such a break causes miscommunication between the parties and potentially far more serious consequences. When there is disruption in the pipeline, then anxiety, stress, and confusion will occur because the interlocutors are not able to share their idea(s) clearly with each other.

Figure 2 Non-healthy Communication



In such a situation—whether it is face-to-face, online, oral, or written—when there is a less-than-ideal communication path between the speakers, one needs to ask several questions to understand where the break is, why it exists, and how to address it:

1. Why is the person acting the way they are?
2. Where exactly is the break in communication?
3. Given the disruption in communication, how could a repair happen to benefit both parties?
4. What could be done so that any potential “vicarious trauma” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 443) is not actively and consciously triggered thereby preventing one person from helping the other?

Just from the perspectives of the two speakers, the complexity in relationship skills should be evident. And that complexity increases if additional speakers or elements such as being on the autism spectrum or having past traumatic experiences are added to the conversational environment. Each will be discussed briefly in turn to substantiate this point.

Recently, there was an American television series called *The Good Doctor* with Freddie Highmore playing Dr. Shaun Murphy, a young resident who was autistic. Dr. Murphy exhibited various challenges with other people, specifically with respect to sarcasm, empathy (Cambra-Badii et al., 2020), and with a “lack of communication skills” (Cambra-Badii et al., 2020, p. 85). As previously mentioned, a person with autism may communicate and see the world differently from neurotypical people. While proper social emotional learning skills must, of course, be demonstrated, one must also be aware that miscommunications and breaks in the interaction pipeline will occur and would need to be repaired. From the perspective of healthy interpersonal interactions, it must not matter whether the person is neurodivergent or not.

Alternatively, while the broad objective of social emotional learning is to develop positive personal and interpersonal skills, sometimes those objectives can be clouded by previous traumatic experiences whether they are consciously known or not. This is an important point because if a person cannot genuinely demonstrate SEL skills with the best of intentions for both parties in mind, then the behaviors may be traumagenic and thus disingenuous.

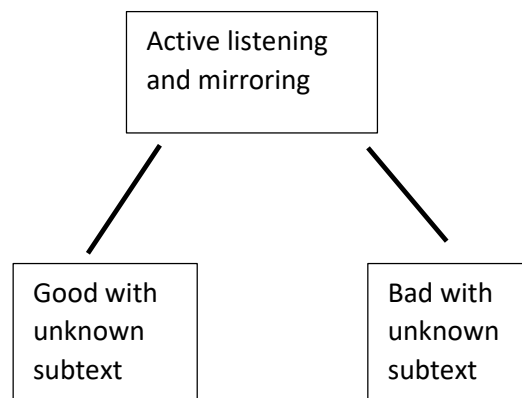
Relationship skills is one of the elements in social and emotional learning where intent depends on the person and their history. Before a discussion can take place about history and intent, a basic definition of manipulation is needed because manipulation can be a traumagenic response and can present itself in different ways with potentially different results. According to Fischer (2022), “manipulation [is . . .] a form of influence where a manipulator tries to modulate the affective states of the manipulated” (p. 171). To some degree, manipulation involves deception (Bělohrad, 2019) where a person’s thoughts and/or behaviors are subtly (or not so subtly) modified to benefit the manipulator.

Within the realm of SEL, one could rightly argue that SEL elements such as active listening and perhaps mirroring allow a person to feel heard and “seen” which are indeed positive behaviors. However, other scenarios may also exist where the desires are less obvious and more traumagenic. When a person comes from a traumatic past, two questions become evident during a conversation: Why is the person actively listening and why is the person demonstrating mirroring?

If a person is consciously interested in influencing and/or exploiting the other person’s thoughts or actions, then manipulation is clearly taking place. Trauma survivors have learned that such behaviors are needed to feel safe, avoid conflict, or predict some dangerous situation; these behaviors have become survival skills for the trauma-inflicted person. What makes this situation challenging is that for the receiver of the manipulated behaviors, there is no easy way to know whether manipulation, in the form of active listening or mirroring, is self-serving or not. The person engaging in those behaviors may not consciously know why they are happening if he or she is not yet aware of any previous traumatic experiences.

Shown visually (see Figure 3), one may consider the same presentations of active listening and mirroring for two different outcomes based on their etiology: good and bad depending on intent (or subtext); one may be viewed as good and healthy (endogenic) while the other may be considered bad and manipulative (traumagenic).

Figure 3 Active listening and mirroring



Responsible Decision-making

The final element in the social emotional wheel is the idea of responsible decision-making where we consider the “consequences of our actions” (CASEL, n.d., p. 4) and are open to potentially new ideas and new perspectives. This is the component where we evaluate the pros and cons as well as “benefits and consequences” (CASEL, n.d., p. 4) of our behaviors with the objective of the greater good of the community.

This element, as with the other four, does not function in isolation; it is connected to relationship skills and self-management. For example, if I blurted out a comment to someone with whom I was talking and did not consider the ramifications of my comment and then did not sincerely apologize for my actions (CASEL, n.d.), the ramifications could be substantial.

Similarly, before a decision could be made, it would be highly prudent to evaluate the pros and cons of the decision to know which choice to make.

In the next section, there will be a shift to discussing the five elements of SEL together and how the elements are interconnected one with another.

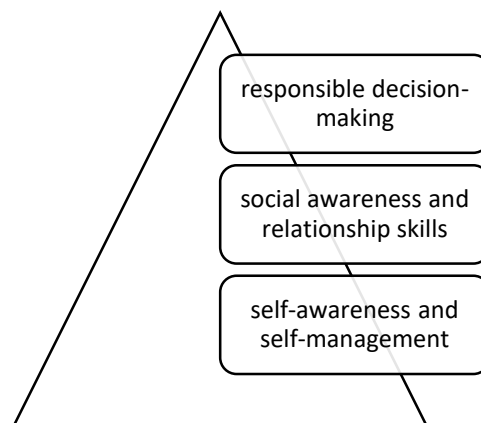
Viewing the Five Elements of SEL Differently

There are different ways that the five components of social emotional learning may be viewed. The first way is seen on the “What is the CASEL framework” (n.d.) webpage where the elements are presented as a circle with the words social and emotional learning at the core.

A second way to present the elements, according to Baumsteiger et al. (2022), is with the acronym RULER to show the different skills that make up social emotional learning: “recognizing emotions in oneself and others, understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, labeling emotions with a nuanced vocabulary, expressing emotions in accordance with cultural norms and social contexts, and regulating emotions with helpful strategies” (p. 469).

A third way to present the components of social-emotional learning would be as a pyramid inspired by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 4) where one must achieve the base level experience before moving upward. This depiction and understanding is accurate because without self-awareness and self-management, a person may not be able to develop sufficient social awareness and relationship skills. Once all those components are understood and incorporated into one’s life, one is only then able to make responsible decisions.

Figure 4 Pyramid inspired by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

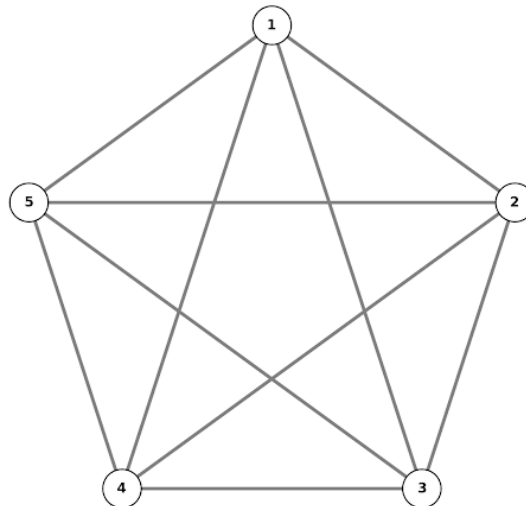


These three ways to view the SEL components—the circle, the acronym, and the pyramid—are valuable tools to learn about the SEL elements but they are overall insufficient as they do not show the inter-connected, almost simultaneous interaction of the five components. Though Figure 4 attempts to show some sort of inter-relationship between the elements, it does not go far enough.

Given the nearly concurrent interplay of cognition, behavior, and interpersonal interaction with social emotional learning, a more appropriate image might be a pentagon with a pentagram

inside because each node, labeled 1 through 5 (see Figure 5), could correspond to one of the SEL components and clearly show their interconnectedness where each node or SEL component is clearly connected to the other four elements.

Figure 5 Interconnectedness of the 5 SEL components



Why Use SEL at all?

By now, the reader should understand the components of SEL, the personal and inter-personal benefits of employing SEL, and some potential concerns with several elements. In this section, some more practical and holistic situations will be offered showing the elements of SEL at play. Before going further, the reader is requested to consider a time in his or her life when a person, through their calmness and strong interpersonal skills, helped address an issue and without whom the situation would have gone very poorly.

One may wonder how this request connects to social and emotional learning. I am reminded what flight attendants tell passengers during the preflight briefing: put your mask on first. In this discussion about SEL as in aviation, one cannot present the tool to other people without first experiencing and believing in its efficacy and value (Choquette et al., 2024). With this information in mind, in this section, two exemplars of how various components of SEL can enhance the situation and interpersonal interactions will be offered.

For the first example, one need only look at how rude people some are toward one another in the world as evidenced by the numerous social media posts about a “Karen” character. This person is opposite a second protagonist who has a calm voice and professional demeanor, and who demonstrates normal, proper, healthy interpersonal relationship skills. At the end of the video, undoubtedly, person with the calm and resolute manner prevails.

From an SEL perspective, we see two important elements in these characters. First, viewers see someone who demonstrates poor self-management and relationship skills possibly—at a

minimum—because of a combination of a sense of entitlement and self-centeredness. The second protagonist demonstrates a high level of self-management and strong relationship skills which result in equally solid and responsible decision-making abilities. Taken together, this person demonstrates high social-emotional learning.

Here is a second, more practical example (OpenAI, 2024). As educators, we know that not all our learners have the same interest in our courses as we do. Some learners do not have the same desire to master nuances that we educators feel is important. In short, these learners just want pass the class, nothing more. Conceptually, that makes sense but when in the thick of the course, we educators can sometimes not understand why care is not taken by learners.

As I reflect on courses I'm taught, and review comments I have made from week to week, I discovered that, broadly speaking, I make the same comments on the same students' papers and wonder why they are not as diligent and conscientious as I would like them to be. At those times, I take a step back and realize I am making inaccurate presumptions because I don't have all the needed information and there are, no doubt, unknown issues may be at play with these learners. Perhaps, indeed, some learners are not as diligent as I would like them to be (or I had been when I was in school). But there may be other more pressing issues at play and I need to demonstrate self-awareness. Additionally, as I reflect, I refrain from making inaccurate assumptions and demonstrate self-management.

When I set up a private meeting with the student and ask if everything is OK, I will, most probably, learn of those unknown issues. At that point, I demonstrate social awareness and share similar personal experiences, words of encouragement, and provide some valuable suggestions including but not limited to time management techniques or assignment extensions (within the requirements of the college). Then, I ask the student what more I could do to help the situation based on his or her needs. In this way, I demonstrate responsible decision-making. Taken together, these skills result in a well-balanced interpersonal environment.

Demonstrating social emotional learning skills in situations as this one can seem very easy from the perspective of hindsight or research as I write this paper. I would be naïve to believe that putting these skills into practice is easy. However, during the times when you, the reader, are frustrated, there is great value in taking a few breaths and stepping back so you do not react impulsively and demonstrate self-management. Such actions will not happen immediately; they take time and continual practice.

A solid foundation now exists so that our attention may be turned to doctoral candidates and the extremely high attrition rates in doctoral programs. More specifically, we can examine how SEL can possible help reduce the high doctoral attrition rates by helping these learners during a challenging time in their educational careers.

Helping Doctoral Candidates through Social Emotional Learning

Earning a doctoral degree is not easy (Calle-Arango & Reyes, 2023) and is designed to be that way. In fact, various authors have shown that doctoral attrition is as high as approximately 50% (Alisic & Wiese, 2022; Fiore et al., 2019; Terrell et al., 2012) and sometimes even higher (Maul et al., 2018). Such information is, without a doubt, alarming.

From the candidate's perspective, anxiety stems from many different elements but especially writing the dissertation (Kaul et al., 2024) as it is a rather overwhelming and taxing (Kaul et al., 2024) experience. For a candidate, the extended writing of a dissertation produces very limited immediate gratification and high frustration (Alisic & Wiese, 2022) because writing at that level is recursive and the stakes are high (Gimenez et al., 2024). Such extended writing causes distress because many candidates are not accustomed to such scrutiny and myopic exactness. And this distress fuels the high attrition rates.

Though an ideal goal would be to reduce the high attrition rates, it is not always possible to do because some personal issues are beyond the scope of faculty members. But within the social and emotional learning realm, there are things that we, as faculty members, could do to help our candidates succeed.

At some graduate schools, checklists, organized by chapter, are used to help doctoral candidates as they write their dissertation. The objective is to present a list of elements that, when taken together, form the minimum requirements needed at that school for each chapter. Following a checklist, one would think, would be an easy and straightforward way to write the dissertation. However, for a number of candidates, that is not always the case. For many candidates, anxiety and imposter syndrome form a barrier to successful writing. They are scared to write a dissertation, feel overwhelmed, and do not feel qualified to be a candidate. Stated in a different way, their affective filter (Chametzky, 2017, 2019) is extremely high thereby blocking them from writing adequately and successfully.

Simultaneous to these feelings, two things occur. First, as doctoral candidates, they are no longer in traditional classes with no one with whom they can interact. Thus, they feel isolated (Barney, 2018; Chametzky, 2020; Kaul et al., 2024; Kokotsaki, 2023; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

Second, because there is now minimal interaction with peers, the writing often suffers as there are basic grammatical errors, a "lack of clarity, poor organization, weak construction of paragraphs, spelling and syntax errors, and poor document structure" (Johnson & Rulo, 2019, para. 10). All these elements are required in a scholarly work such as a dissertation. With each revision, some candidates become increasingly frustrated. Eventually the negative feelings outweigh the good feelings and they quit the program.

As faculty members, in light of the aforementioned social and emotional learning discussion, we need to help our doctoral candidates instead of believing that they just are not meeting the standards and it is up to them to do so. Through our help, they can attain their goals. Regardless of the role we play in their academic lives, we have an obligation to help and guide these learners. In this section, a discussion of four behaviors will be presented. When taken together, they should help reduce candidate anxiety and potentially reduce the exceedingly high attrition rates of doctoral candidates. These non-consecutive behaviors form the acronym "AREA"—Acknowledge, Regulate, Empathize, and Arch; each behavior will be discussed in turn.

The first behavior of the AREA acronym is Acknowledge. At this point, most probably, candidates' anxiety level is high. Above all else, they want and need to be heard because they are frustrated and oftentimes scared and/or anxious. The primary role of faculty members is to let them vent and acknowledge their frustrations. Active listening is a highly valuable skill to use here. Additionally, faculty members need to validate their concerns as genuine because for

the candidates, they are real issues. It does not matter whether faculty members feel the candidates are right and justified or not. Misunderstandings can be addressed and corrected at a later time when the affective filter of candidates is lower.

The second behavior is Regulate. Faculty members need to demonstrate self-management and refrain from coming across as off-putting or unpleasant in any way. Staying and remaining calm is necessary while the candidate is upset and frustrated. After all, having two stressed or upset people (the candidate and the faculty member) serves no good purpose. To achieve good self-regulation, faculty members should also choose their words carefully and reflect before speaking. Rather than using “you” statements, they would be better served using “I” statements to have greater impact on the candidates. The faculty member needs to demonstrate strong relationship skills and restraint.

The third behavior in the AREA acronym is Empathize. Faculty members need to show compassion because the candidates are in pain. Professors need to empathize with candidates and perhaps share some personal stories of when they were in similar situations so the candidates can see that they are not unique in their feelings and experiences. Additionally, professors can even share resources they might have used in similar situations and then explain why those resources were so valuable to them. By sharing resource information as well as personal anecdotes, faculty members attempt to create a bond with the candidates thereby reducing any possible feelings of loneliness and isolation (Ames et al., 2018, Chametzky, 2018, 2020; Kokotsaki, 2023).

At this point in their studies, interpersonal relationships are crucial for doctoral candidates and significantly enhance the doctoral experience (Thao & Thuy 2024). Thus, anytime a professor can interact with the candidate in a one-on-one nature (either face-to-face or via video), such action should take place.

The final behavior is Arch. Faculty members know that being a doctoral candidate is a process. The candidate who starts doctoral candidacy is not the same person at the end of the program. At the beginning of candidacy, the learner is naïve and does not know what to expect. But at the end of candidacy, that person has developed into a researcher and scholar who is ready to be a mentor in their own right to new candidates. To help candidates develop, faculty members need to meet the candidates where they are and hold their hands as they grow. The hand-holding will eventually slow down and stop as the candidate progresses in the program, but is vital in the beginning stages.

The growth process may be viewed as an arch. Professors can see the bigger picture and know where candidates are and where they need to be because the faculty member has already done the degree and can easily view the entire trajectory. Thus, it is the job of the professor to help get the candidate from where they currently are to where they need to be in as smooth a manner as possible.

One way to accomplish this task might be to put some modifications in place with the goal of meeting their needs. These adjustments must be within reason and adhere to school policy. For example, instead of requesting full chapter reviews, faculty members could ask to read individual sections at a time to make the workload more manageable and less overwhelming for candidates.

Another way to help transport candidates from where they are to where they need to be is through collaboration and coaching where the faculty member acts as a mentor to the candidate and to help them develop the required skills. Very often, insecurity fuels anxiety in doctoral candidates. To help address this anxiety, the faculty member would collaborate and co-construct (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024) a concept by employing Socratic questioning. Here is a brief dialogue between a candidate and a faculty member showing what collaboration and co-construction might look like.

Candidate (C): I don't understand what (data) triangulation is.

Faculty Member (F): I'll be happy to help you. What do you think it is?

C: Having multiple sources of data.

F: That's a good start. What else?

C: I don't know.

F: OK. Where might you go to get additional information?

C: I could look in XYZ source.

F: That's good. You can also look at ABC source. Please let me know what you find.

C: <after reading the ABC and XYZ sources> Oh, so not only do I need multiple sources of data, but I need to compare the data from each of the source to understand nuances in the findings.

F: Exactly. That is indeed (data) triangulation. Good job.

The reader can see here that through collaboration and co-construction (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024), the candidate arrived at a correct answer. Collaboration and co-construction also help the candidate develop resilience (Kokotsaki, 2023), which is another valuable element to help the candidate succeed in their studies. Collaboration and co-construction with Socratic questions could be used for many different topics germane to doctoral work: the choice of a research design, the method of analysis, the types of instruments, etc.

The four aforementioned behaviors comprising the "AREA" acronym are not meant to be used one time only; they will be used and demonstrated repeatedly throughout the doctoral candidacy process until the candidate successfully completes the program. While there is never a guarantee that these behaviors will work all the time, the best faculty members can hope for is that each time these behaviors are used and demonstrated, candidates are brought off the proverbial ledge, continue their studies, and grow from the experience. In a certain sense, taken together, these four behaviors form a more holistic experience (Wilken et al., 2024) that is needed for healthy social and emotional development.

CONCLUSION

There is an anecdotal belief that during the Christmas season people are kinder and nicer to one another than any other time of the year. Whether there is evidentiary proof to support such a belief or not, it is a sentiment that has prevailed throughout the years. And, such kindness speaks clearly and directly to the five aforementioned SEL behaviors presented in this paper.

This author is reminded of a famously attributed African proverb that states “It takes a village to raise a child” (Arnold, 2018, para. 1). In terms of social and emotional learning, the proverb is equally appropriate because each of us—faculty members, administrators, friends, relatives, and strangers—can do our part to help each another grow and develop—not just doctoral candidates—but anyone who might need or want some social and emotional kindness. The responsibility to demonstrate proper social and emotional skills, given the complicated and interconnected psychological, neurological, emotional, and social components involved, must be shared by each of us not just during a particular month of the year but throughout the year.

The reader is asked to consider what the world could be like if all human beings engaged in social emotional learning and followed the rather famous 1980s television commercial for a particular shampoo where the actor loved the product so much, she “told two friends” (Retroist, 2015, para. 1) and so on and so on. Imagine the intellectual, social, psychological, and emotional health that could take place.

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