Integrating Mindfulness & Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Summary of key points on how mindfulness adds value and enhances effects of SEL programs:

- Mindfulness and SEL support one another in a synergistic fashion

- By targeting the three key skills of attentional control, self-awareness, and emotion regulation, mindfulness builds student self-regulation to a greater extent than social emotional programs alone. In turn, self-regulation allows students to think clearly enough to choose a strategy they learned in their social and emotional learning curriculum – in the heat of the moment.

- Mindfulness can support students in paying closer attention, enabling them to better learn academic content and SEL skills.

- Mindfulness can promote prosocial attitudes and behavior by fostering empathy, kindness, compassion, and gratitude.

Mindfulness is relatively new to education, and many educators want more clarity about how mindfulness fits in with social and emotional learning (SEL). Many educators wonder if they should be choosing one approach instead of the other, or using both approaches.

In this article, we’ll explore the similarities and differences between mindfulness and SEL. We’ll show how the two are substantially different and complementary, and describe how integrating mindfulness could increase the effects of existing SEL programs.

First, let’s describe the practices, skills, and targeted outcomes of mindfulness and SEL.

**Mindfulness Practices**

The practices of mindfulness include:

- *Explicit training of attention.* For example, students learn to focus on the breath or sounds.

- *Developing emotionally positive states* including kindness, compassion, and gratitude. Exercises help students deeply feel the positive emotions.
• **Training in regulating our responses to impulses.** Mindfulness is a practice of developing an ability to let go of reactivity and act from a place of greater ease, stability, and wisdom, rather than compulsively pursuing our preferences.

• **Psychoeducation,** which includes information that normalizes the experience of students and enhances understanding of their internal life and behavior.

**Mindfulness Skills**

The practices and psychoeducation of mindfulness are hypothesized to develop specific skills. In one prominent model of mindfulness, Michael Posner and colleagues suggested three core skill sets: emotion regulation, attentional control, and self-awareness.

![Diagram showing the three skills cultivated by Mindfulness: Model from Posner & Colleagues (2015)](image)

**Mindfulness Outcomes**

What are the aims of mindfulness and what are its benefits? As a practice and approach to living, mindfulness aims at profound flourishing. Practiced over a period of years, mindfulness seeks to create an emotionally balanced, meaningful life, animated by a spirit of compassion and caring.

Among youth, outcomes of interest include stress management, emotional well-being, and cognitive performance. While preliminary, some studies with youth find improvements in these areas (For more details, see the research page of our website [here](#)).
Now, let us consider the practices, skills and outcomes of SEL.

**SEL Practices**

SEL programs take diverse approaches; we try to synthesize common features here:
- *Psychoeducation* and exercises designed to enhance *goal-directed* behavior.
- *Reinforce attitudes of mutual respect* and commitment to building a *supportive group*.
- Learn *emotion recognition* and *regulation*.
- Provides *tools for resolving differences* by developing greater emotional intelligence and communication skills. For example, practices of perspective-taking aim to develop empathic connection and prosocial behavior.
- *Tools and psychoeducation regarding decision-making* attempt to minimize impulsivity and reduce destructive behaviors including truancy, substance use and conduct problems.

**SEL Skills**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the leading organization in disseminating high-quality SEL programming, highlights five core SEL skills. See the CASEL website here for a description of each of the skills, illustrated in the diagram below.

The skills in red (self-management and self-awareness) are skills practiced internally, those in blue (social awareness and relationship skills) are interpersonal, while responsible decision-making is in green to denote that it is practiced both internally and interpersonally.

**SEL Outcomes**

In an important review of more than 270,000 students receiving SEL programming, researchers highlighted five key outcomes of SEL programs:
1. Healthy attitudes
2. Positive social behavior
3. Reduced conduct problems including substance use
4. Reduced emotional distress
5. Improved academic performance.
The researchers found that universal SEL programs, delivered by classroom teachers, demonstrated benefits in all five key outcomes. These benefits were considered small but meaningful. Of special interest, academic performance was improved by 11% - which is larger than the average effect of a typical academic-focused intervention.

**Comparing Mindfulness & SEL**
There is some overlap between the practices, skills, and outcomes targeted by mindfulness versus SEL programs. We should bear in mind that many mindfulness programs include or explicitly incorporate aspects of SEL, and SEL programs sometimes involve small doses of training in mindfulness practices.

Now that we've looked at the individual aspects of each approach, let's hone in on the differences between them.

**Differences in practices:** The practices of SEL rely more heavily on psychoeducation and interpersonal skill development. Although mindfulness may include some similar exercises, mindfulness functions more centrally as an attentional training. As such, mindfulness more closely resembles training such as physical exercise. In mindfulness practice – as in exercise – there is less emphasis on cognitive understanding, and more emphasis on engaging the attention in particular ways.

**Differences in targeted skills:** While the skills of the approaches have considerable overlap, SEL more explicitly focuses on creating harmonious classrooms and communities. Mindfulness invests heavily in developing self-regulation. A focus on self-regulation directly supports the first two SEL skills – self-awareness and self-management. SEL emphasizes interpersonal and decision-making skills. When students self-regulate more effectively due to mindfulness, we expect their relationships to improve. However, mindfulness does not directly target relationship skills in the manner SEL does.

**Differences in targeted outcomes:** Inspecting the target outcomes of mindfulness and SEL, again, we find overlap and notable differences. Mindfulness is often less explicitly goal-oriented. Of course, in order to conduct research and introduce mindfulness in education, mindfulness programs need to specify targeted outcomes. Nevertheless, explicit emphasis on particular desired outcomes can undermine the unpressured, investigatory spirit of the practice. SEL more clearly specifies the desired outcomes: prosocial behavior, emotion regulation and academic performance. SEL is also more likely to specify long-term outcomes regarding success in adulthood.
How Might Mindfulness Support SEL Programming?
When experts develop, test and disseminate a program – mindfulness, SEL or another – it is not uncommon to develop deep personal investments in one's own particular approach. Additionally, program developers compete for limited resources: funding, classroom time, teacher energy and leadership support. These factors can create a sense of zero-sum game, where a win for one program is considered a loss for another.

We hope that mindfulness and SEL can transcend this dynamic and the most effective elements of each approach can be incorporated and leveraged for greatest benefit. As our expertise is in mindfulness, here we suggest the rationale for incorporating mindfulness into existing SEL programs. Of course, an equally good case can be made for incorporating SEL into mindfulness programs.

What value does mindfulness add?
By targeting the three key skills of attentional control, self-awareness, and emotion regulation, mindfulness builds student self-regulation to a greater extent than social emotional programs alone. In turn, self-regulation allows students to think clearly enough to choose a strategy they learned in their social and emotional learning curriculum.

Here is an example of how mindfulness can support more positive behavior and allow students to use SEL strategies. Suppose Sally tells Billy he is a big jerk. The self-awareness piece of mindfulness training allows Billy to stop and notice that he feels angry and hurt. He might decide to bring his attention first to sensations in his body, and then taking some slow breaths, and in this way regulate his emotions. He might then decide to use a strategy he learned in SEL, such as using words to describe what he's feeling and make a request. For example, he might say, “Sally, I felt hurt and angry when I heard you call me a big jerk. Could you please explain what made you say that?”

This example shows how mindfulness helps to create space and replace impulsive reactions with thoughtful responses.
Our graduates frequently tell us that mindfulness provides a “missing piece” of awareness and self-regulation in order to be able to respond and use SEL strategies, rather than just react. Leigh Suga, an elementary school counselor in San Jose, California, says:

“SEL curricula - the one thing they’re missing is mindfulness. Without mindfulness the kids aren’t even aware of what’s happening, they don’t know when to implement these strategies ... mindfulness created a little bit more of a space to have some breathing room to figure out “Ok, if I hit back, I’m gonna be sent to the office.” They’ll do breathing, they’ll walk away. If someone grabs something from them, there’s a little pause, there’s more space. It doesn’t feel like everything’s a reaction.”

Secondly, the attention training aspect of mindfulness is likely to be relevant for academic achievement and learning SEL skills. Mindfulness decreases mind-wandering, which is associated with poorer task performance. Experimental evidence suggests that enhanced attention can improve reading comprehension and improves cognitive capacities.

Lastly, mindfulness may be beneficial in promoting the prosocial attitudes and behavior that form a centerpiece of SEL. The classic description of empathy – ‘to stand in some else’s shoes’ – presumes that we already know what it is like to stand in our own shoes. With striking clarity, mindfulness reveals what it’s like to experience difficult as well as pleasant emotions. The intimacy of our encounter with ourselves provides a deeper basis for accurate empathy. Recent data support this hypothesis. Mindfulness and empathy are also linked through their shared relationship with stress. While mindfulness
decreases stress, stress weakens empathy. The suite of practices including kindness, compassion, gratitude and joy can also promote prosocial behaviors.

Some studies have examined the effects of mindfulness on altruistic behavior and uncovered positive connections. Neurobiological data offer preliminary but plausible explanations for the observed effects of mindfulness on prosocial behavior.

We have highlighted the rationale for incorporating mindfulness into SEL programming. The practices, skills and outcomes of mindfulness and SEL are largely complementary. Their commonalities make them good partners, while their differentiation suggests that one approach can profitably be integrated with the other. Developing protocols that intelligently blend the practices, skills and aims would be a worthy endeavor.

References


