

FOSTERING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR YOUTH AND STAFF IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

By Brandon Tice

When I was first introduced to the out-of-school-time (OST) field in 2013, I was struck by two realizations. First, the simplicity of the youth development principles that guided OST programs impressed me: foster supportive relationships with youth and adults, make learning hands-on and relevant to young people's interests and identity, and engage young people's families and communities. As a recent graduate of the formal education system, these simple tenets were new to me, but their truth and value was clear. Second, as I shifted to the research and messaging materials intended to communicate the value of OST programs to a public audience, I was surprised to see these materials focused mainly on the role of OST in impacting school performance: boosting young people's attendance, behavior, and grades in school. These materials also emphasized how afterschool programs helped working families and kept kids safe. These were all obviously meaningful outcomes to celebrate, but they failed to capture the vibrancy and meaning of OST as I had begun to understand it.

That's why I've been thrilled to see the emergence of new social science research and frameworks that define how high-quality OST programs foster the social and emotional learning (SEL) of young people. This language of how to foster young people's SEL has already sparked several new initiatives among funders and researchers in the OST sector. Additionally, it provides a welcome opportunity to increase public recognition and funding for the vibrant work of youth development that has been happening in high-quality youth and OST programs for at least a century. Nonetheless the history of youth work also reveals the risks that can accompany new funding opportunities, such as the advance of unrealistic expectations around assessment of youth outcomes.

The question of how Minnesota's OST field advances social-emotional learning is critical, because if approached the wrong way it could damage the meaningful youth-adult relationships and youth-centered approach that is the foundation of youth work practice, and is the source of the rich social-emotional learning that happens in afterschool programs. In this paper, I will examine foundational thinkers from youth work's past and the current context of Minnesota's OST field to reveal a promising approach to strengthen the OST field for the opportunities of the 21st century. Ultimately, I hope to make clear that because meaningful youth-adult relationships are the central strength of youth work and high-quality OST programs, Minnesota's OST field must first focus on fostering SEL competencies and intentional practices in its own workforce before it hopes to advance SEL for young people. This approach isn't a retreat from claiming and supporting the OST field's role in advancing social and emotional learning. Rather, it is a chance for the field to stay grounded in its belief in continuous human growth and development, while unlocking the passion and ingenuity of the OST field to test, refine, and share innovative approaches, practices, and tools to foster SEL.

Before we explore how the OST field's past and present context informs the ideal approach to advancing SEL, let's start by defining social-emotional learning as it's currently understood. First, keep in mind that the term "social-emotional learning" goes by other names depending on who's talking about it—non-cognitive skills, 21st century skills, and character development, to name a few—yet SEL seems to be the dominant frame for discussions in Minnesota's OST field, and I believe it is the most focused and descriptive term, so I will use it going forward. When it comes to defining what social-emotional learning is, I prefer the comprehensive definition set forth by the Collaborative for Social, Academic, and Emotional Learning

(CASEL), which defines 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, 2016). Depending on which framework you’re using, you could add or subtract specific skills to this definition. Overall though, this definition is well-established and widely used in both formal and OST settings, so it’s a good reference point.

While there are many existing frameworks for SEL, I argue that the most useful framing for thinking about how SEL happens in OST programs is *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices in Social Emotional Learning* put forth by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality and the Susan Crown Exchange (SCE) (2016). This “SEL Field Guide” lays out a framework for SEL in after-school programs composed of six key standards or domains of social-emotional learning as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: STANDARDS OR DOMAINS

					
Emotion Management	Empathy	Teamwork	Responsibility	Initiative	Problem Solving
<i>Abilities to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions.</i>	<i>Relating to others with acceptance, understanding, and sensitivity to their diverse perspectives and experiences.</i>	<i>Abilities to collaborate and coordinate action with others.</i>	<i>Dispositions and abilities to reliably meet commitments and fulfill obligations of challenging roles.</i>	<i>Capacities to take action, sustain motivation, and persevere through challenge toward an identified goal.</i>	<i>Abilities to plan, strategize, and implement complex tasks.</i>

Source: SEL Field Guide, Weikart Center for youth Program Quality and the Susan Crown Exchange

The SEL Field Guide intentionally refers to these domains as “SEL skills,” to reinforce what the research shows: that these skills can be taught and learned, and that there are effective ways to foster this learning. What makes this set of domains particularly appealing is that they’re broad categories that other SEL frameworks can map onto. Each domain is also broken down into “Youth Experience” and “Staff Practice” indicators associated with it, which helps make them more concrete and accessible, and also keeps the focus on how staff are using practices to create youth experiences. Another feature of these SEL skills is that they’re not only based in research, but were also adjusted in response to feedback from the eight OST programs that participated in the 16-month “SEL Challenge” designed by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality and the SCE to identify promising practices, within the context of youth programs, for building young people’s SEL skills. Thus, they have been thoroughly vetted by expert researchers and on-the-ground practitioners. Finally, the SEL Field Guide also defines four “Curriculum Features” that serve as the foundation of a quality afterschool program, which align with the quality practices laid out in the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), which is the most widely-used quality assessment tool in Minnesota’s OST field.

There are many other frameworks for SEL, and it’s likely that reaching broad consensus on a single framework, even within Minnesota’s OST field, will be an ongoing and challenging process. This makes perfect sense because human social and emotional behavior is complex, and it’s impossible to put its rich diversity into neat categories. Yet because the SEL Field Guide presents a broad framework for SEL, which focuses attention on how high-quality staff practices create the conditions for youth to experience and

develop social-emotional skills, I believe the SEL Field Guide presents the most promising framework to guide the OST field's ongoing discussions about advancing SEL. Now that we understand SEL as it is defined in the present day, we can ask: how should Minnesota's OST field go about advancing its ability to intentionally foster SEL?

To answer this question, let's first get grounded in the thinking of John Dewey, a foundational philosopher and educational thinker who first expounded many of the principles of youth work such as experiential and youth-centered approaches to learning. In *Democracy and Education*, his treatise on the purpose and form of education in democratic societies, Dewey addresses the flaws in seeing education as merely a way to prepare the immaturity and dynamism of youth for the fixed and static nature of adulthood:

Our tendency to take immaturity as mere lack, and growth as something which fills up the gap between the immature and the mature is due to regarding childhood comparatively, instead of intrinsically. We treat it simply as a privation because we are measuring it by adulthood as a fixed standard... (1916/2004, p. 40)

When we abandon the attempt to define immaturity by means of fixed comparison with adult accomplishments, we are compelled to give up thinking of it as denoting lack of desired traits... Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence, education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. (1916/2004, p. 50)

These passages highlight an irony surrounding the OST field's discussions of fostering social-emotional learning in young people. While the discussions focus mostly on defining the right SEL indicators for young people to aspire to—sorting through the laundry list of aspirational skills like empathy, initiative, emotional regulation, responsibility, relationship skills, to name a few—they often devote little energy to discussing how to intentionally foster SEL in the adult OST staff who work with the youth. Dewey reminds us that in the genuine youth-adult partnerships that drive learning, we need to acknowledge the need for both young people and adult participants to have opportunities to learn and grow.

The importance of equipping adults as well as young people to understand, apply, and build social-emotional skills is based not only in foundational youth work values, but in research as well. In the *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Development Framework*, Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich and Heath (2015) synthesized knowledge from the fields of youth development, psychology, sociology, education, and the cognitive sciences to describe what young people need to grow and learn. Their report defined young adult success not only by educational attainment, but by young people's ability to "fulfill individual goals and have the agency and competencies to influence the world around them" (p. 1). Based on this definition of success, and their comprehensive survey of the research on learning, the report found:

What matter most for development is not the intentions of adults, but their actual enactment of practices in relation to young people... Critical to the process of making meaning out of developmental experiences are strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with caring adults who can encourage young people to reflect on their experiences and help them to interpret those experiences in ways that expand their sense of themselves and their horizons. (p. 5)

In short, the report concludes that for adults to effectively support youth’s learning— including SEL—they must be able to experience, reflect on, understand, and interpret those SEL competencies themselves.

For many years Minnesota’s OST field has embraced this truth about how youth and adults need opportunities for shared and continuous learning. This common knowledge was affirmed in Ignite Afterschool’s *Believe It. Build It*, which posits supportive youth-adult relationships and intentional program design as key foundations of quality OST programs that positively impact youth. Yet in a recent survey of attitudes towards SEL among OST leaders in Minnesota, 14% responded that they never provide SEL training to staff, while 29% rarely provide it (Walker, Blyth & Sheldon, 2016). The most frequent response was that they “Occasionally” provided SEL training for staff (42%).

FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF SEL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR MINNESOTA OST STAFF



Source: Perspectives on Social and emotional Learning from Out-of-School-time Leaders in Minnesota

This lack of specific attention and training for social-emotional learning for adults mirrors a more general lack of professional development opportunities in the OST field. A survey of OST professional development providers conducted by Ignite Afterschool found that 51% of OST staff lacked adequate access to professional development, and that demand for OST was increasing, but not the systems to support it (Moore, 2014). Considering this, it’s no wonder that when asked, “What should OST do moving forward?” in the SEL survey, the responses with the highest agreement were “Strengthen professional development opportunities” and “build stronger community OST systems.”

If Minnesota’s OST field wants to build capacity to intentionally build youth’s social and emotional skills, the clear next step is to follow Dewey’s instruction to supply “the conditions which insure growth” (1916/2004, p. 50) by strengthening professional development opportunities—both in general and

connected to SEL—to the adults in the OST workforce. These efforts need to go beyond just one-off trainings though, and should instead be viewed more broadly as an initiative to foster staff’s understanding of healthy social-emotional behaviors and how to promote them – both for youth and for themselves. By accounting for the current needs of Minnesota’s OST field, the research-based practices of effective OST programs, and the foundational youth and human development values at the heart of OST, this approach holds the most promise for Minnesota’s OST field to claim and sustainably advance young people’s SEL in the long run.

Yet how would it look for Minnesota’s OST field to go beyond supporting intentional SEL practices and start measuring the impact of these efforts on youth? This question inevitably comes up in discussions around advancing SEL, and it’s an essential question for the OST field’s ability to demonstrate its impact on SEL. Unfortunately, this question also seems to be coming too soon in a rapidly-developing area of social science research. To address this question, the American Institutes of Research (2015) provides useful guidance, advising OST programs interested in targeting and measuring their impact on youth’s SEL to, “Identify which skills, of the many listed in the [SEL] frameworks earlier, the program targets. Make choices. Think about program activities. Decide on what few key social and emotional competencies the program truly targets and measure those—not the universe of social and emotional skills that exist” (p. 1). In addition, they provide a useful note of caution, writing that, “social and emotional competencies are not universally agreed upon, and their measurement is both complicated and controversial” (p. 1).

While these approaches might not lend themselves to the OST field quickly and decisively claiming their role in fostering young people’s SEL, I believe they provide practical advice for the nascent state of frameworks and assessment tools in the OST field. That being said, the OST staff and youth self-assessment surveys provided through the *SEL Field Guide* are promising resources, because they were designed specifically for use in OST programs, come with guides on how to use the data in a Continuous Program Improvement cycle, and align with the widely-used Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool. However, these resources are new and untested, so shouldn’t be seen as “the” resource for evaluating the impact on young people’s SEL.

The increasing awareness among funders, policymakers, and researchers about the importance of SEL for young people’s success is undoubtedly an opportunity for Minnesota’s OST field. My task with this paper has been to recognize the importance of pursuing that opportunity, while grounding any next steps in the present realities of the OST field and the foundational principles of youth development. Based on my analysis, I believe the OST field must first focus its energies on fostering SEL competencies and intentional practices in its own workforce. The ideal system of professional development supports should empower OST programs to choose which SEL indicators or measures align with their program goals, strengthen their staff’s intentional SEL practices, and go through a Continuous Program Improvement process (such as *Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets – M3*) that will allow them to reflect and improve on how they advance young people’s social-emotional learning. This approach will be challenging, but it carries the potential to brighten not only the future of Minnesota’s youth, but the future of the adults who fully invest themselves in young people’s success and wellbeing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRANDON TICE enjoys seeking out new experiences that will challenge his thinking and broaden his perspective. He is endlessly curious about how to best design public policy that responds to the unique challenges of the 21st century, especially in the areas of education, the workforce, and youth development. Brandon's job as the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Ignite Afterschool, Minnesota's afterschool network, gives him plenty of opportunities to indulge that interest. He will also continue to explore these policy issues through the Masters of Public Policy program at the UMN Humphrey School, starting in Fall 2016.
