

Social Emotional Learning: A Discourse for the Times

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Abstract

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has risen up the educational agenda in recent years but is now considered as crucial given the problems brought about by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper considers SEL as part of a wider historical process in which children are encouraged to voice what they think and feel, with this being considered taken as a key aspect of their development. In so doing children learn how to display their agency and how to talk in psychological terms such how they think and feel about what they learn or other matters. Talking is a key aspect through which children learn to engage in various actions as well as the normative ways of connecting emotions with what is learned, both formally in school as well as informally through their immersion within society. In summary, the paper therefore offers a thought piece or critical commentary on SEL as a discourse both of, and for, the times.

Keywords: social, emotional, learning, discourse, childhood, schooling

Introduction

Emotions can be considered as fundamental to thinking and learning. In this regard, Hawkins (2017) points out that, ‘We can create situations which encourage emotional and physical feelings, stimulating learners to discover and re-construct their knowledge’ (p. 151). The school is seen as having a crucial part to play in the development of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) among children (Zins et al., 2007). SEL is considered in terms of being aware of self and others, of understanding one’s own emotions and managing them, and harnessing them in the learning process. It has been associated with academic achievement (Denham & Brown, 2010) as well as the ability to engage in analytical communication and working collaboratively with others (Weissberg et al., 2015). Research has found that students engaging in SEL showed have enhanced classroom behaviour as well as the ability to cope better with stress (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

SEL is also considered as a crucial, not only for children’s development and well-being but also their teachers’ in order to meet the challenges of a world of complex conditions (Jones and Bouffard 2012). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges in which school closures have led to a greater focus on online learning in which SEL is operationally much more difficult for teachers to encourage and enable. Now that schools are opening up again in many counties, SEL is perhaps more important than ever (Hadar et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021). However, in order to understand the importance of SEL there needs to be much more of an understanding of its broader historical and ideological context.

SEL in historical context

The study of childhood has been mainly limited in social sciences to the study of cognitive and emotional development in psychology, and the processes of institutional socialization in

sociology. Much this work has considered the way in which children pass through stages on their way to maturity as an adult. Both approaches have examined how children learn and develop through interaction with adults and as such how their visibility as a distinct social category has become a matter to be attended to. It is worth noting that in Aries (1965) classical work, *Centuries of Childhood*, that the notion of childhood in medieval society did not exist and that to all intent and purposes children as a distinct social category were 'invisible'. Aries argues the 'child' in effect became part of the adult world soon after infancy with no attempt to delineate age or physical maturity. However, Pollock (1983) argues that the claim that the status of childhood did not emerge until the seventeenth century can be contested and that the child was not simply integrated into adult life. Jenks (1996; 2005) has shown how Western concept of childhood is culture-specific and has evolved, and still is evolving, over time. For example, Rousseau's *Emile* of the early nineteenth century presents an image of childhood which pre-dates modern developmental psychology by arguing that this period of life involves a distinct way of perceiving, thinking, and feeling. This hint of a kind of unfolding maturational process is open to potential damage if it is not nurtured adequately. We see the vestiges of this view of childhood today in which childhood is regarded as a natural state and stage of being, and one that requires to be protected from any kind of damage. It is therefore easy to see why the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent toll on children's emotional development can be seen as a matter of concern.

This demarcation of childhood as a distinct state and stage was further enshrined through the separation of the child from work, the provision of state education and a raft of health and welfare provision. By the mid-twentieth century childhood had become a distinct stage of life associated with the notion of moral and psychological development and a burgeoning child-rearing and family advice literature soon followed. This literature comprising academic and populist books and articles has promoted a discourse built around the 'needs' of the child thus furthering the notion of childhood. Much of this literature prescribes the means by which these needs can be met such as to allow children to grow and thrive as if part of a natural aspect of the life cycle. Much of these ideas stem from developmental psychology, and in particular the work of Piaget who suggested stages of intellectual growth with each stage developing out of an incorporating the previous one.

Jenks (1996; 2005) regards this age-and-stage approach as being in keeping with the frame of reference of modernity through which the child only comes to know the adult world in a gradual manner. This stage of life is therefore accorded considerable weight in terms of the total life experience and one that called for attention to be paid by adults to the children's developing cognitive and affective development. Jenks also points out how childhood has become associated with material provision and that this is taken to be natural and grounded in an ideology of care guided by emotional discourse. It is a culture in which adults are expected to act in the child's interests in which this ideology of care has come to legitimate the economic and cultural capital invested in the promise of childhood. Jenks refers to this as 'futuraity', a discourse of caring, enabling and facilitating children to become morally well-adjusted adults.

Jenks brings his analysis of childhood into the world of today and argues that mass education and patterns of consumption have shortened childhood and undermined it. He sees it becoming increasingly difficult the child to build a sense of identity as part of a reflexive self. It is therefore in this context that SEL has gained traction as an ideological discourse in which

children need to be actively helped to develop a sense of their own identity. Children are increasingly considered in terms of their ability to voice what they think and feel and to negotiate their way through childhood by adopting certain ways of talking. They are aided in this by the school and other adults who encourage them to adopt psychological discourses as ways of accounting for themselves and in asserting their agency. It is through this way of talking that children learn to become accountable moral agents in the world, expected to express 'thoughts', 'opinions', 'views' and 'feelings'. Thus, we live in an age in which children are actively encouraged to be consulted, and to speak on a number of issues that would have previously been the preserve of the adult world.

Talking Children

One of the most important things that children must learn is to make themselves 'visible' as agents the world. Perhaps one of the key aspects of childhood today is the extent to which children are part of age of discourse. This can be characterized in two ways; firstly, as a feature of the today's concern with 'communication' and secondly as related to Jenks's point about the erosion of the boundary between adulthood and childhood in terms of self-expression. Children are expected to have their say, to be consulted and to be listened to. However, they have to be guided in this process by adults in order to produce the kinds of psychological discourse required. This is often accomplished through prompting children to talk about their understanding of the world and how they feel about matters, including in the world of formal schooling.

Childhood has therefore become a site for discourses concerning issues of stability, integration, and social bonds (Hunt (2005)). Much of this is focused around the view that children need to acquire conversational skills, that adults need to talk to them more and that children need to be 'free' of pressures so that they can simply be children. As noted above there is a concern that children's psychological growth has being stunted by a lack of interactional and conversational opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The move to online learning and lack of face-to-face opportunities for children to interact with one another has led to a concern that they may unable to develop adequately in terms of SEL (Hadar et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021).

Childhood as psychological 'development' is therefore very much in evidence in contemporary discussions about the effects of the pandemic. In this view, learning to converse is linked to the idea that talk functions as a forward-referenced means of moving the child along towards well-adjusted adulthood. The way children talk therefore gets treated as an index of the developmental stage they are at, both in terms of cognitive and emotional development. As Edwards (1997:38) points out with respect to infant cognition, this is largely a post hoc enterprise with an idealized model of adult cognition as the 'end point' and a linear path drawn towards how the child reaches this point. The presence or absence of some form of reasoning is taken as indicting how far along the developmental path the child has travelled. Much the same kind of argument can be made with respect to children's conversational skills. These are often taken as 'language development' because of what come later. The visibility of children in relation to how they talk is read into normative expectancies with respect to chronological age and how far a child has advanced along the adult-child continuum of conversational competency. Likewise, children are now expected to cope with an increasingly complex world

in which competencies associated with SEL are considered as crucial to their ability to cope with such complexity (see e.g., Laukkonen et al., 2019).

The Socialization Problem

Edwards (1997:296) points out that the learnability of discursive and other cultural practices follows from their visibility and public nature. In other words, children learn ways of talking, a psychological discourse that can be acquired through participation in public practices. Sacks (1972, 1992) referred to this as the socialization problem, that is, how new members learn to take part in a reflexive manner by virtue of taking part. In this way children learn how to project their agency and competency towards becoming an adult through the adoption of this kind of discourse. Sacks considered this as a designed to be acquirable 'visible' feature of conversational competence such that the vocabularies of motive could be utilized and subverted. Thus, he notes how accountable actions can be characterized as an inevitable direct causation or can be more loosely and indirectly associated with an action. Sacks notes how parents can subvert the latter by turning it into a matter of the former (e.g. a punishment that inevitably follows a misdemeanor by the child). He also notes how children can learn which aspects of their behaviour are visible as evidence for their prior intention and actions and how they can subvert this by producing such behaviour to elicit these reactions. Thus, the inferential visibility of moral conduct is something that children learn in terms of seeing matters and talking about them.

This is a very different treatment of socialization than Mead's (1934) account and later refinements by Denzin (1977) and Shibutani (1955). In these accounts of socialization children acquire a sense of self through interactions with significant others and pass through various stages on their way to becoming a person-in-society. For Mead this involved three stages that culminates in the child's ability to learn the expectations and moral prescriptions bound up with the various roles they play in society. The later refinements by Denzin and Shibutani considered issues of interactional age and reference groups respectively on this process. However, despite these modifications there is still the tendency to consider socialization as a process in which children acquire a distinct psychological sense of self and this has become the core 'problem' to be examined. Even sociologists who may have a more direct connection with sociolinguistics such as Bourdieu (1977; 1992) posit such a view by referring to a theorization of habitus that trades on an unreflexive mentalist account of development. This presupposes the development of a psychological system in which dispositions associated with membership of social and cultural groups come to generate practices, perceptions, and attitudes. This system is then able to produce 'meaning' (i.e. make sense), store and process it. Now whilst Bourdieu gives more weight to sociolinguistic practices and culture, he cannot rid himself of this 'inner/outer' dualism and the reification of the child developing as a person in terms of a 'mind' that functions as a perceptual system. The point here is that the 'problem' is reduced to one of a theory of mind rather than an examination of sociolinguistic practices and how these are learned as practices.

Social actors during conversation treat one another as agents based on the assumption that talk is under voluntary control, and that as such what is said is treated as a morally accountable. These cultural-discursive practices are therefore a feature of childhood that is learnable by virtue of this engagement in discursive psychology. These psychological representations

provide the means for a varied way of engaging in social and institutional life and a means of making it intelligible and orderly. Cognitive references to ‘thinking’, giving ‘reasons’, ‘knowing’ ‘interpreting’ or ‘understanding’ provide publicly accountable criteria for agency. This provides a set operational moves that can be applied as a resource for agency and its accountability. Take for example, the references to “thinking things through” or “thinking before acting”. These provide yardsticks for agency with respect to various discursive activities such as making ‘decisions’ and how far children are along the adult-child continuum in terms of their maturity of thought.

Cognition is regarded as the element of control and providing a basis for thinking before acting. The affective or emotional element is taken being spontaneous and representing ‘feelings’ that in terms nonetheless can be taken as an accountable basis for action within conversation. The emotional basis for action that can be presented as understandable, as a means for literally moving a person to do something, or indeed for inaction. It is often portrayed as an influence on how people think, where thinking is taken as reasoning and emotion as providing a means of supporting this as in terms of action or as something that skews or bypasses the reasoning process. Reason implies stability and order in how people conduct themselves; unchecked emotion can be seen as threatening in terms of association with lack of order.

This duality is interesting in terms of the ways in which the discursive usage of emotion terms can be a flexible and useful means of characterizing action. Again, how far children are able to deploy this range of flexibility in practice is taken as being how developed they are as persons. As Edwards (1997) notes emotion discourse can be put to a great variety of uses within a range of social practices due to their flexibility as an accounting resource:

- (i) They can be contrasted with cognitions in terms of their less deliberative nature.
- (ii) They can be taken as being as ‘understandable’ and appropriate as how any reasonable person would react.
- (iii) They can be characterized as being the outcome of events or in the nature of the person.
- (iv) They can be treated as being kept under the control of a person’s reasoning or as reactions that resist control.
- (v) They can be presented as the interaction of mental and physiological systems, as natural, or as derived from moral and ethical concerns.

The ‘socialization problem’ here is in how children learn these sorts of contrastive ways of using emotion talk across a range of social practices and their normative associations. Studying how children deploy these ways of talking, either in terms of direct psychological accounting, or in terms of orientating towards aspects of an inner/outer dualism can be taken as a way of exploring their socialization into a usage of a major cultural dualism: taking people’s ‘outward’ accounts and actions and considering these as representations of what they are like ‘inside’ as thinking and feeling agents. I want to stress that this derives from accountability within conversational practices rather than as the result of some sort of inner mental processing and exchange of representations between interlocutors.

Children therefore need to learn how to ‘talk the psychological talk’ as part of the social practices that they engage in, and of course they learn this by virtue of their interaction with adults and other children. It is something that is a tacit understanding within conversation in

terms of how they portray individual attitudes, beliefs, motives, goals, judgements etc. Notice here that orientating to something does not necessarily involve an explicit mention of these psychological terms but rather how people treat each other as if these are germane or at stake. In effect, this orientation is one of a conversational set of discourses that refer to an intra-psychic world. This is something that is normatively attended to as a means of accomplishing order within conversation. It is this that children learn, ways of talking as a means for accomplishing actions in the world.

This cultural-discursive practice is founded upon an orientation of interlocutors as employing a discourse of mental processes in order to account for how they perceive matters and as the basis for action. In this way events are placed prior to this operation, as having happened and needing to be communicated, to be ‘understood’ in terms of an emotional response. In this communication model of conversation there is a realm of people placed in amongst events and occurrences and a realm of mental operations requiring to be brought together. Here rationality is associated with the psychological notion of ‘perception’. Accounts of, and about, actions are presented as part of texts of ‘meaning’ in which a mental processing system is assumed to be brought to bear upon matters in order to display these as the result of psychological agents who reach ‘decisions’, have feelings, have deliberated on something or other or who have can account for something in a way that ‘make sense’ to others who can understand a course of action. It is interesting to note here how even ‘emotion talk’ as the basis for actions may nonetheless be treated as rational in terms of their accountability or intelligibility.

This kind of view of ‘development’ goes beyond simply the acquisition of SEL competencies, to one of learning how discourse works in all its contrastive and flexible ways as a means for accomplishing action. It is not that children learn the notion of ‘causation’, for example, and can understand what it means as a way of ‘making sense’. Rather it is as Edwards (1997:41) tellingly points out that it is a discursive means for explanation as something that is required precisely because there are other sorts of discourse that can be deployed contrastively against it: intentions, reasons, coincidences, mistakes etc. The availability of different sorts of explanations is what makes explanations such a key resource for children to learn to use.

Learning to Present an ‘Inner’ Psychology

A major part of a child’s everyday engagement in conversational practices at school involves showing ‘understanding’, and not just about learning about subjects such as mathematics or music, but rather how these feature in people’s lives. Indeed, because childhood is taken as being an unprecedented period of learning, then children are expected to publicly demonstrate their learning as a sign of development. In this form of talk children need to learn to present themselves as psychological agents in terms of possessing the ability to display their ‘mental processes’ in operating upon an external world such that they can be seen to ‘make sense’. In this way the events are placed prior to this operation, as having happened and needing to be ‘understood’. Talking about the ‘making sense’ of matters is a kind of grammar that allows interlocutors to stabilize versions of events. Indeed, to refer to matters as “nonsense” or “making no sense” is in itself part of this; a discourse that stabilizes matters in the routine of the conversation.

In this communication model there is a realm of events and occurrences and a realm of mental operations requiring to be brought together in order to apprehend or grasp the nature of 'things' events and occurrences. In this way the selection and active constitution of these matters as a social practice is occluded through the reification of 'reality' and 'mind', through the 'external' world that requires to 'understood' or 'made sense' of by an inner mental processing system that 'perceives' that outer reality. It is a discourse that children learn, often through parental and teacher checks upon their 'understanding'. This association between the presentation of objects, events and occurrences and the mental operations that have been applied to them provides for a means of establishing rationality as inhering in the child as an agent and as an index of their development. In this way a perceptual-cognitivist form of conversational practice is actively maintained through an 'inner/outer' dualism in which the child is encouraged to look out onto the world in order to 'make sense' of it. It is this outer world that is taken as presenting itself as requiring 'interpretation' or 'understanding' in terms of an active 'inner' response. It can also be the basis for creating a version of temporality in which what 'has happened' is taken as being apparent in the how children learn to account for 'decisions' or 'choices'. Actions are manufactured in the course of practices that require such accounting. There is a huge cultural imperative upon people to produce in conversation, or at least attempt to produce, normatively appropriate psychological discourse that fits with particular social relations and interactions. For example, children learn that references to 'thinking' are taken as indications of deliberation and intent whilst referring to 'feelings' can be used to portray actions as arising out of the immediacy of being gripped by emotion or in situations where there is some combination of both.

Children therefore learn that the basis for agency has to be intelligible and therefore such accounts must attend to this in their construction. In this sense the hearer of such an account is positioned as 'outside' of the person's 'thinking' as another but external psychological agent who must in the course of the account employ his or her own inner processes in order know the other's mind. Perhaps this is what makes dialogue such a powerful means of helping children learn to produce accounts of themselves as psychological agents for they must learn that it is predicated upon the construction of talk that is based upon the maintenance of a mentalist discourse and the notion that unless we account for our actions through this discourse that they will be taken as literally non-sense. Socialization here is learning how to display 'understandings', 'interpretations' or 'feelings'. This is why SEL has risen up the agenda as an educational concern; in a world where communication is vitally important children need to be able to talk about what they think and how the feel. Such feelings can also be linked to what is learned in class: the joy of music, the emotions invoked in stories and literature, feelings associated with moral issues such as environmental problems, or learning about history in the context challenges to the dominance of particular cultures and groups in society. Learning is not simply a value-free, intellectual exercise devoid of emotional context. It is for this reason that SEL is regarded as of crucial importance in connecting children as people, as agents in society, with what they learn in school and beyond.

Conclusion

It is certainly the case that parents and teachers are now being encouraged to invest more time and effort in talking to children in terms of SEL given concerns about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic through school closures and consequent lack of social contact. However,

this concern pre-dates the pandemic and I have sought to provide an alternative account of child ‘development’; one that is based on how children acquire, through their immersion in cultural-discursive practices, the ability to use language as a means for accomplishing various actions as an index of their developing ability to display their sense of identity and agency in the world. It is more than mere acquisition of social skills but rather the ability to use discourse as a public and visible means of engaging in the world. SEL is likely to become much more important in a post-pandemic world but not simply to remediate the current problems and deficiencies brought about by months of school closures but also because that world is now considered to be much more complex and requires of people to communicate much more in a variety of ways. SEL is discourse-based pedagogy that guides the notion of what children’s development should be about. It is a discourse both of, and for, the times.

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