# The politicization of and misinformation about social-emotional learning

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how social-emotional learning (SEL) has been misrepresented and politicized in recent educational and political discourse. Drawing on the author's lived experience in Cuba, where censorship and ideological control were (and continue to be) central to education, the article traces parallels to current debates in the United States and other global contexts. Critics have accused SEL of promoting ideological agendas, often using a strategy known as "accusation in a mirror," which deflects attention by attributing to SEL the very forms of indoctrination they themselves are enacting. The article clarifies what SEL is and is not, highlighting its global roots in holistic and relational education. It also explores how SEL has long been practiced in Indigenous, community-based, and culturally grounded traditions. Rather than a political tool, SEL is presented as an essential part of human development and education. The article offers practical steps for educators, researchers, and policymakers to reclaim the narrative around SEL and affirms its role in fostering emotional literacy, community well-being, and the competencies needed for ethical participation in democratic societies.

## Preface

*Conocer diversas literaturas es el medio mejor de libertarse de la tiranía de algunas de ellas… Conocer para libertarse, conocer para crecer, conocer para crear* (Martí, 2005, p. XVII)

*Knowing diverse literatures is the best way to free oneself from the tyranny of some of them… Knowing in order to be free, knowing in order to grow, knowing in order to create*

I was born and raised in Cuba, a country known for its dictatorial regime and widespread censorship practices, including extensive control over information, literature,[2] and media (Aguirre, 2002; Aldous, 2015; Henken & García Santamaría, 2022). Growing up in Cuba, I witnessed firsthand how information banning and censorship became powerful tools for indoctrination, restricting access to diverse perspectives and suppressing critical thought in the process. Under the Cuban government, access to information is tightly controlled, and literature (i.e., books, publications, videos, etc.) or perspectives that challenge the communist narrative are systematically suppressed and oppressed. Books are banned, media is strictly regulated, and voices that express dissent or question the government's ideologies are silenced, exiled, or made to disappear. My early life experiences on the island were

characterized by a single narrative, repeated across textbooks, classrooms, and public discourse, leaving no space for critical examination or alternative viewpoints. I remember how questioning official doctrines or simply exploring banned literature deemed incompatible with state ideals could result in serious consequences, including academic marginalization, social stigmatization, and worse. The profound impact of living in an environment marked by systematic suppression of ideas continues to be evident in present day in the population's limited ability to critically engage with different perspectives or individuals with differing viewpoints, ultimately facilitating the government's objective of fostering conformity and ideological loyalty.

Indoctrination, in general terms, refers explicitly to the practice of imposing specific beliefs or ideologies through deliberate control over information and discourse (Puolimatka, 1996). It involves systematically restricting or entirely suppressing alternative ideas, perspectives, and critical thinking to ensure widespread acceptance of a single, often politically motivated narrative. Rather than promoting a balanced or analytical understanding of complex issues, indoctrination emphasizes rote memorization, repetition, and acceptance of a predetermined worldview (Chazan, 2022). It is particularly insidious because it denies individuals the cognitive tools to analyze or challenge the beliefs that are being imposed, trapping them within an intellectual framework

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carefully designed to sustain those in power. Indoctrination thrives in environments where questioning is discouraged, alternative sources of knowledge are banned or discredited, and conformity is incentivized—usually by force or punishment. Its ultimate danger lies not only in limiting individual intellectual freedom but also in weakening societies by preventing healthy debate, diversity of thought, and social-emotional growth.

In the context of schooling and educational research, indoctrination has been explored through various lenses (Paglayan, 2022). Scholars have long distinguished indoctrination from education using criteria about methods, intentions, evidential openness, and the cultivation of critical autonomy (e.g., Lewin, 2022; Snook, 1972). In U.S. schools, for instance, charges of indoctrination have surfaced across multiple subjects, including, but not limited to: (a) sex education, where opponents framed comprehensive programs as moral or political indoctrination (see Irvine, 2002); (b) the teaching of evolution, culminating in court battles over intelligent design[3] (see Kitzmiller v. Dover, 2005); and (c) ethnic studies/multicultural curricula, as in Arizona's HB 2281 targeting Mexican American Studies (see James, 2010). In many of these episodes, critics denounced indoctrination while advancing their own preferred ideological content or restrictions, a pattern consistent with the *accusation in a mirror* strategy I introduce and analyze later (Marcus, 2012). For example, abstinence only campaigns positioned comprehensive sex education as indoctrination even as evidence shows such policies rest on moral claims rather than effectiveness (Santelli et al., 2017), and intelligent design disclaimers cast evolution as dogma while inserting religiously derived alternatives (Kitzmiller v. Dover, 2005). More recently, public calls to end indoctrination have been paired with mandates for patriotic education (White House, 2025), reflecting that conversations about indoctrination and education are far from over.

## Introduction

I begin this article with a preface because I want to explain my intimate relationship with information banning, censorship, indoctrination, and dictatorship. My lived experiences have deeply sensitized me to the detrimental effects of suppressing alternative ideas and perspectives. After all, "viví en el monstruo y le conozco las entrañas" [I lived in the monster, and I know its insides] (Martí, 2001, p. 36). Paradoxically, the recent political discourse in the United States has evoked unsettling parallels to those experiences from Cuba, as movements to restrict certain educational practices—like social-emotional learning (SEL)—gain momentum. Governmental discourses, supported by conservative groups, are increasingly politicizing, misrepresenting, and/or accusing SEL practices of being a veil to discriminatory practices and/or a subtle form of indoctrination, often connecting SEL to what has now become political topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI; Vilcarino & Prothero, 2025). Despite substantial evidence demonstrating SEL's beneficial role in nurturing students' ability to thoughtfully engage with diverse perspectives and develop emotional intelligence (CASEL, 2025; Greenberg, 2023; Pentón Herrera, 2024a), critics claim it serves ideological agendas by imposing specific values on students. These misunderstandings or deliberate mischaracterizations dangerously obscure SEL's true aim: equipping individuals with the competencies needed to navigate the social and emotional complexities of our increasingly unstable, chaotic, and uncertain world.

In the editorial piece of a recent Special Issue I edited for *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies* (Pentón Herrera, 2024b), I argued that these criticisms toward SEL are not merely academic disputes about curricular choices; they represent a broader political and societal

struggle over the value placed on social-emotional skills and growth. Furthermore, the politicization of and misinformation about SEL represents "a broader battle against the acknowledgment and prioritization of well-being for both students and teachers (with)in educational systems and (with)in societies at large" (p. 11). The opposition to SEL often emerges from fears surrounding perceived threats to traditional values and established power structures. Critics frequently frame SEL as an encroachment on parental authority, personal beliefs, and cultural norms, inaccurately suggesting it promotes a monolithic ideology rather than fostering inclusive, emotionally intelligent, and reflective individuals. Consequently, this politicized discourse around SEL reflects deeper societal anxieties, including discomfort with conversations about emotions, respect, and diversity, as well as resistance to transformative educational practices that empower students to critically assess and empathically engage with their local community and the wider world.

Inspired by ongoing debates and misrepresentations about SEL in the United States and beyond, I aim to offer a counter-narrative in this article. To do this, I begin by clarifying the essence and purpose of SEL. Next, I delve deeper into the politicization of and misinformation about SEL proposing that, at its core, critics are employing tactics referred to as accusations in a mirror (Marcus, 2012), a propaganda method wherein groups falsely attribute their own unethical behaviors or intentions to their opponents, thus deflecting attention and distorting public perception. By dissecting these strategies, I illustrate how such distortions contribute to widespread misunderstandings, fueling fears that SEL practices are covertly indoctrinating students rather than preparing them to thoughtfully navigate life's complexities and connect with their natural world. Then, I explore steps that have been taken and can be taken to move forward as a field, highlighting concrete actions educators, researchers, and policymakers can undertake to reclaim the narrative surrounding SEL. I end the article by emphasizing the urgency of protecting educational practices that cultivate social-emotional growth and well-being as foundational to democratic societies and the flourishing of the human and natural worlds.

### SEL: essence, purpose, and background

SEL is a term originally introduced in 1994 by Elias et al. (1997) to describe teaching practices that focus on developing and equipping learners with the social-emotional competencies they need to be self-aware, healthy, responsible, and successful. Contrary to common misconceptions, SEL is not meant to substitute instruction time or a focus on academic developing; instead, SEL seeks to facilitate a learning environment where learners can acquire the competencies needed to be successful both in academics and in life (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Although many definitions and understandings exist about SEL, in this manuscript, I understand it as the process by "which individuals of any age develop and apply competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve beneficial goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively" (Pentón Herrera, 2024b, p. 6). In simple terms, SEL teaches students life skills to be a more empathic and successful human being.

In the past decade, scholars have emphasized that learning is inseparable from culture, context, and power, giving rise to Transformative SEL (T-SEL)—an approach that retains SEL's core competencies while explicitly foregrounding identity, agency, belonging, and engagement with equity so that all students encounter the conditions that make learning possible (Jagers et al., 2018; Jagers et al., 2019). This 'equity turn' in SEL discourse has become a flashpoint for critics, who often associate topics of equity, identity, and fairness with indoctrination (Anderson, 2022; Eden, 2022; Pondiscio, 2022). For clarity, here I use equity in the education-policy sense of fairness in access, experiences, and outcomes. While ideas of fairness and justice exist in many traditions globally (Kieliszek, 2024), the modern educational discourse

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[3] In general terms, intelligent design refers to a pseudoscientific argument for the existence of God and it is intended to demonstrate that living organisms were created by an 'intelligent designer.' Intelligent design is often used as an argument against evolution (see Aviezer, 2010).

of equity has been most fully developed in Western policy contexts, particularly through international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and within debates on human rights, multicultural education, and critical pedagogy (Edgar, 2022). As a result, some communities may perceive it as imported or ideological concepts that are foreign to them.

In certain conservative and/or highly religious contexts, especially where schooling is tightly linked to doctrinal authority and societal gendered role prescriptions, equity-oriented discussions about identity or participation can be framed as threats to moral order and thus become politicized. Scholars of Egypt, for example, show that, even amid curriculum reforms, religious instruction remains central, and some textbooks reproduce conservative gender roles and narrow conceptions of citizenship (Ibrahim, 2023; Wafa, 2021). In such conservative and/or highly religious settings, SEL initiatives that emphasize belonging, perspective-taking, and equitable participation can be criticized as importing a Western 'equity' agenda and therefore become politicized. Throughout this manuscript, I return to these dynamics and suggest ways to communicate SEL in locally grounded, values-based terms that invite shared purpose with families and communities.

*What SEL is not*

It is important to clarify a few misconceptions about what SEL is and it is not. First, SEL is not solely restricted to the CASEL framework (CASEL, n.d.), which is perhaps one of the most popular and leading entities supporting and promoting SEL. As seen in the Harvard EASEL Lab (n.d.) website, SEL frameworks and practices exist all over the globe and, it should be this way, as SEL interventions must not be a one-size-fits-all; instead, they are expected to be shaped by the environments in which they exist (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). That is, SEL must be understood as context-sensitive—shaped by the cultural, historical, and institutional environments in which it is enacted. This means that SEL should not be thought of as a standardized curriculum but a flexible, adaptive approach to human development (Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023). Moreover, SEL interventions are not politically motivated; rather, they are deeply relational and grounded in human experiences and needs for connection, self-understanding, and well-being. This broader, more inclusive perspective challenges narrow or politicized views and helps us reconnect SEL to its philosophical and historical roots.

Second, although Elias et al. (1997) is credited with coining the term 'social-emotional learning,' the underlying practices—though not labeled as such—can be traced back centuries and are deeply rooted in the works of influential philosophers, educators, and psychologists (Pentón Herrera, 2024b). For example, Maria Montessori (1964) emphasized the development of the whole child, advocating for environments that nurture social, emotional, and cognitive growth through autonomy and purposeful engagement. John Dewey (1997) championed education as a democratic and experiential process, arguing that emotional development and reflective thinking are inseparable from meaningful learning. Paulo Freire (1970) further pushed the boundaries by framing education as a dialogic process grounded in love, empathy, and social justice, insisting that learning must connect with learners' lived experiences. Developmental psychologists and scientists also provided core foundations for SEL; for instance, John Bowlby's attachment theory and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory showed how caregiving relationships and nested social contexts shape social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bowlby, 1982; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These examples are only a handful of the many scholars and educators who laid the groundwork for what we now call SEL, reinforcing that cultivating emotional intelligence and interpersonal competence is essential to ethical, human-centered education. Thus, SEL is not a modern trend or imported ideology, it is part of a long-standing global tradition of holistic, student-centered learning.

And third, SEL is not confined to formal classroom spaces, as it is a practice embedded in cultures around the world. As explained by Mesinas and Casanova (2023), Indigenous communities, particularly diasporic Indigenous groups from Latin America, cultivate social and emotional competencies through communal and intergenerational practices deeply rooted in ancestral ways of knowing. Their work highlights how values such as *comunalidad and cosmovisión*—which emphasize reciprocity, respect, and emotional interconnectedness—play a foundational role in nurturing SEL competencies like social awareness and relationship-building, long before these were formalized in educational discourse. Similarly, Rogoff (2003) and Rogoff et al. (2007) document how children across cultural settings learn empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation through everyday participation in family and community life. Complementing this view, Karam and Oikonomidoy (2024) illustrate how a refugee-background family engage in SEL organically through culturally grounded practices like *mujamalah* and critical mindfulness during out-of-school tutoring and resettlement support, emphasizing SEL's embeddedness in relational and community contexts. These examples affirm that SEL is not a novel educational add-on but a culturally situated practice that predates schools and transcends borders. Recognizing these global, historical roots of SEL challenges narrow discourses of politicization, and affirms its relevance as a universal, culturally adaptable approach to human development.

*The politicization of and misinformation about SEL*

A central concern driving opposition to SEL is the perception that it imposes ideologically charged values under the guise of emotional education. Critics like Eden (2022) and Rufo (quoted in Anderson, 2022) argue that SEL—especially in its newer forms like T-SEL—has strayed from its original intent, embedding progressive ideologies such as critical race theory (CRT), gender theory, and anti-racism into curricula. Moreover, the integration of terms like identity, agency, and equity into SEL frameworks is perceived as evidence of a politicized shift, transforming what were once considered neutral competencies into vehicles for social justice messaging (Eden, 2022; Pondiscio, 2022). These critiques position SEL as a 'Trojan Horse' (Pondiscio, 2022) for promoting controversial social agendas. In turn, this has led to legislative proposals across several U.S. states to ban or heavily regulate SEL content, and to intensified scrutiny in school board meetings, where parents/guardians and political actors question its alignment with community values (Abrams, 2023; Anderson, 2022).

Another issue raised in the politicization of SEL is the concern over data collection and privacy. As part of some SEL implementations, students are asked to complete surveys or assessments designed to monitor emotional well-being, social skills, and classroom climate. Critics worry that such data gathering can infringe on student and family privacy, especially when the scope includes sensitive topics like mood, beliefs, and identity (Eden, 2022). These concerns are magnified by fears of data breaches, as seen in the case of New York City Public Schools, where the personal information of over 820,000 students was compromised due to a hack of the online grading system (Elsen-Rooney, 2022). It is important to note, however, that the data breach was unrelated to any SEL initiative and instead stemmed from broader vulnerabilities in the school system's cybersecurity infrastructure. Additionally, critics argue that the absence of standardized definitions across SEL initiatives and providers leads to inconsistencies in how SEL is delivered and interpreted, further fueling skepticism.

Concerns about the expanding scope of teachers' responsibilities have also contributed to the politicization of SEL. As Pondiscio (2022) and Shrier (2024) note, the growing emphasis on emotional regulation, trauma sensitivity, and student well-being can blur the line between teaching and therapy. This shift may unintentionally position educators in quasi-clinical roles for which they are neither professionally trained nor ethically prepared. Yet, such critiques often come from individuals

whose professional realities reside outside the classroom and have very limited, first-hand experience of the emotional labor at the heart of teaching. As McMain (2023) argues, public discourse tends to cast SEL as a well-meaning but misguided attempt at therapeutic saviorism, thereby ignoring the reality that emotional encounters are woven into the everyday realities of classrooms. The truth is that the social and emotional dimensions of teaching are inseparable from instructional practice. As Darragh and Pentón Herrera (2026) point out, teachers are not mental health professionals, but we work with human beings, many of whom arrive with trauma, and we need to learn to support them and support ourselves as well. While educators are not responsible for delivering therapy, we must be equipped to recognize emotional distress, create safe learning spaces, and know when to refer students to appropriate professionals (Pentón Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024). Ignoring these human dimensions of teaching is not neutrality—it's neglect. Thus, SEL, when grounded in context and care, is a necessary support, not an overreach.

At the heart of these and many more criticisms throughout the years (see McMain, 2023) lies a deeper societal anxiety about the evolving role of education itself. For some parents and guardians, the integration of SEL into curricula feels like an overreach—blurring the line between academic instruction and personal development, and raising questions about who holds authority over children's emotional and moral growth (Anderson, 2022; Tyner, 2021). This unease is especially pronounced in conservative and religious-leaning communities, where SEL is often viewed as a liberal, elite-driven initiative disconnected from local values (Anderson, 2022). The backlash is not solely about SEL content but about optics of control and trust, particularly the perceived marginalization of parental input. As Mehlman Petrzela (2022) and McMain (2023) observe, this mistrust taps into a longer history of educational culture wars, echoing earlier debates around sex education, multiculturalism, and moral instruction. Together, these dynamics reveal that the SEL debate is less about the competencies it promotes and more about who has the right to define identity, morality, and authority in our schools.

In my view, these tensions over control about education do not emerge in isolation from broader societal dynamics. They are part of a wider campaign to regulate knowledge, constrain truth, and redefine what counts as legitimate learning. The recent surge in curriculum censorship and book banning in U.S. schools, particularly content related to race, gender, and emotional well-being, reveals a deliberate effort to restrict students' access to diverse perspectives and critical reflection. As Ates and Brooks (2024) argue, these practices are not neutral acts of curricular oversight; they are forms of linguistic weaponization and historical revisionism aimed at suppressing empathy and reinforcing dominant cultural narratives. What we are witnessing is not a disagreement about pedagogy, it is a coordinated attempt at truth herding, where emotional development, literature, and identity are systematically policed in order to preserve particular ideologies and silence others. As I make this statement, I find it important to clarify that these practices are used by all political sides and ideologies; no one is exempt.

For instance, these practices are used by those known as *the left* (i.e., socialists, communists, democrats, etc.), as I have shared in the preface, and by those known as *the right* (i.e., conservatives, republicans, etc.), as seen in the United States in present times. Similarly, it is also used by politicians following other doctrines such as theocracy, where religious dogma is used as the primary framework for determining acceptable knowledge and behavior. In Iran, for instance, state-controlled education is closely aligned with Islamic ideology, and any dissenting views, particularly those related to gender equality, secularism, or emotional autonomy, are systematically excluded or criminalized (Kalb, 2017; Milani, 2015). In such contexts, emotional expression itself can become politicized, monitored, and punished, especially when it challenges the moral codes dictated by religious authority. Even in non-theocratic states, authoritarian regimes frequently manipulate educational

content to serve political agendas. In Hungary, for example, the government has centralized control over textbooks and removed or revised content related to LGBTQ+ identities, migration, and pluralism to align with nationalist ideologies (Scherle & Heinrich, 2017). These examples across ideological and geopolitical contexts make it clear: the policing of knowledge and emotion in education is not the sole domain of any one political spectrum, but a common tool of control for those seeking to maintain power through the regulation of thought, identity, behavior, and human connection.

To reclaim SEL from reductionist critiques, it is essential to first, recognize that education, whether we like it or not, organically involves three inseparable domains: (1) academic, (2) social, and (3) emotional. Developmental psychology and affective neuroscience research have consistently shown that learning is not a purely cognitive act; rather, it is profoundly shaped by our emotional and social environments. As students develop their academic skills, they are simultaneously forming neural connections shaped by emotions, relationships, and social context (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2011). For instance, emotional states like anxiety or belonging directly influence working memory, attention, and motivation, all of which are critical components for academic success (Cohen, 2006; Pekrun, 2009). Similarly, social interactions within classrooms provide the relational scaffolding that supports deeper cognitive engagement and long-term retention (Zins et al., 2004). To treat these domains as separate is to misunderstand how the brain—and education itself—works. Teachers know that meaningful learning cannot occur in isolation from emotional safety and social connection. SEL is not a distraction from academic rigor, it is a prerequisite for it.

Similarly, the *social* in social-emotional learning must be understood as more than interpersonal niceties or behavioral compliance. Social learning equips individuals with the ability to navigate complex human relationships, collaborate across lines of difference, and contribute meaningfully to communities at the local and global levels. Social competencies are not just classroom activities; they are life skills. The World Economic Forum (2025) identifies interpersonal skills as among the most essential skills for future workforce readiness. Thus, social intelligence—the capacity to understand, relate to, and influence others (Goleman, 2006)—is increasingly linked to better employment outcomes, leadership potential, and overall life satisfaction (Amdurer et al., 2014; Azañedo et al., 2020). Classrooms that cultivate relational awareness, inclusive dialogue, and mutual respect are not only more democratic; they help prepare students for the demands of a globalized world where diplomacy, negotiation, and teamwork are vital. Social-emotional learning, thus, has the potential to foster the human capacities that undergird civil society, economic opportunity, and interpersonal flourishing.

Finally, it is vital to recognize that emotions are as ancient and complex as our own history; that is, "emotions are part of the biocultural story of being human" (Boddice, 2017, p. 12). What we feel, how we are expected to feel, and whose emotions are legitimized or dismissed are all shaped by structures of race, class, gender, and ideology (Ahmed, 2014). Thus, SEL is not simply about helping students feel better, it is about supporting them in developing emotional awareness and literacy in ways that are context-sensitive, ethically grounded, and relationally informed. When critics frame SEL as a neutral, feel-good add-on—or, conversely, as a dangerous vehicle for political indoctrination—they obscure this complexity. In reality, emotion is already at the center of schooling: in classroom tensions, in teacher-student relationships, in feelings of safety, shame, curiosity, or care. As educators, we are already navigating emotional landscapes daily, as teaching is an emotion-laden activity (Zembylas, 2003). SEL gives us language and tools to do this work more thoughtfully and to ensure our and our students' sustainability and success. Acknowledging the emotional dimensions of learning is not political overreach, it is pedagogical responsibility.

*Accusations in a mirror*

Accusation in a mirror is a propaganda technique whereby individuals or groups falsely attribute to others the very actions or intentions they themselves are engaging in, effectively creating a smokescreen to deflect scrutiny (Marcus, 2012). This strategy functions by pre-emptively accusing adversaries of manipulation or indoctrination, thereby legitimizing one's own efforts to control narratives and behaviors. As a discursive tool, it is insidious: it inverts truth, positions the accuser as morally superior, and manipulates public fear to justify restrictions or censorship. In the context of SEL, the accusation-in-a-mirror strategy has been deployed to paint SEL as a vehicle for political indoctrination, when in fact the resistance to SEL is often motivated by ideological agendas that seek to suppress pluralism, empathy, and critical thinking (Sherman & McVeagh-Lally, 2022). The danger of this strategy lies in its ability to distort perception; that is, those who accuse SEL of overreach are often the very actors attempting to limit educational freedom and impose narrow ideological norms under the guise of protecting children.

Critics of SEL have consistently employed this strategy throughout the years, framing SEL as a manipulative tool to subtly instill controversial values and undermine parental authority. These accusations portray SEL not as a developmental approach, but as a Trojan Horse (Pondiscio, 2022) for advancing ideologies that create ideological tensions with the public detractors hope to recruit in their efforts. By doing so, they capitalize on moral panic, mobilizing parental anxieties and community outrage. Yet, in accusing SEL of being ideologically biased, these critiques often mask their own political motives. As Sherman and McVeagh-Lally (2022) reported, several campaigns against SEL have been orchestrated or funded by politically conservative groups who see schools as battlegrounds for cultural control. In essence, the narrative of indoctrination becomes a tool of indoctrination itself, utilized to silence SEL and advance a particular moral and political agenda. This is an example of accusation in a mirror at its best: accusing SEL of manipulation while manipulating public opinion to delegitimize holistic education.

Concrete examples of this strategy are most prominently visible across the U.S. political landscape, but it can also be observed in other countries. School boards have become arenas where SEL is attacked using emotionally charged rhetoric, often drawing on disinformation and reductive interpretations of what SEL entails (Anderson, 2022). For example, in Virginia Beach, parents began pressing school officials to explain whether routine SEL practices, such as teaching students to name their feelings or work collaboratively, were secretly linked to critical race theory, a mischaracterization that spread from conservative media into local board meetings (Anderson, 2022). State legislators in Florida, Texas, and other regions have proposed or enacted bills that curtail SEL programming, citing concerns that it promotes divisive concepts or undermines traditional family values (Gross, 2022). These legislative moves rarely work in isolation; they are frequently tied to broader efforts to ban books, censor curricula, and redefine public education according to political ideologies. Such examples reveal how accusations of indoctrination are not about protecting students but about asserting ideological dominance. In weaponizing emotional discourse and parental fear, critics enact the very ideological manipulation they claim to resist. This tactic not only erodes trust in educators and public institutions, but it also deprives students of essential tools such as emotional intelligence, civic engagement, and human connection, which are essential for a happy life and for becoming global citizens in today's world.

The consequences of this propaganda tactic are profound. When SEL is falsely portrayed as a political Trojan Horse, its actual benefits—increased academic performance, improved mental health, stronger relationships (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023; Greenberg et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl, 2017)—are obscured. More dangerously, this strategy contributes to a larger climate of fear and censorship, where educational decisions are driven by ideology rather than research, and where teachers are discouraged from engaging students in meaningful dialogue about emotions, ethics, or identity. Moreover, sidelining SEL reinforces a reductive view of education that treats students as disembodied brains to be filled, rather than whole human beings with emotional, social, and cognitive needs. It also reinforces a narrow view of teaching as merely technical instruction delivery, rather than a complex, human-centered profession that requires emotional labor, moral judgment, and relationship-building, often at a personal cost to teachers' own well-being. This, in turn, devalues education as a profession and erodes respect for teachers themselves, as we are witnessing in present times. It is not by chance that in places and contexts where SEL is most politicized, the teaching profession and teachers are often delegitimized, de-professionalized, and cast as ideological threats.

By dissecting strategies such as accusation in a mirror, we can expose critics' manipulative nature and reclaim the narrative: SEL is not about political control but about human growth. Reclaiming SEL requires recognizing the fear-based tactics used against it and reaffirming its grounding in care, neuroscience, intercultural empathy, and democratic education. Otherwise, we risk allowing bad-faith actors, who are detached and disconnected from actual teaching, to define our pedagogical priorities not by truth, but by propaganda.

*Moving forward as a field*

How, then, can we move forward as a field? According to Prothero and Yap (2024), four steps that individuals can take to temper or avoid altogether the politicization of SEL are: (1) define, (2) seek, (3) tailor, and (4) include. In the first step, it is recommended that individuals and organizations implementing SEL define it in a way stakeholders (i.e., faculty, parents, guardians, students, etc.) can understand. During the second step, community input should be sought out before and during the implementation of the SEL initiative. In the third step, it is recommended that the SEL message is tailored to the local culture and values, recruiting local leaders to explain why these SEL skills are important for students and the community at large. Lastly, during the fourth step, Prothero and Yap (2024) recommend including parents and guardians as meaningful partners; acknowledging that parents and guardians are students' first teachers, and that their feedback is vital to improving SEL initiatives.

While the four steps proposed by Prothero and Yap (2024) are pragmatic and valuable for building stakeholder buy-in, they are, in my view, insufficient. Advancing the field requires engaging the deeper ideological, normative, and practical questions that shape SEL—i.e., questions about values, authority, and the purposes of schooling—that extend beyond these four operational steps. For instance, one of the most enduring criticisms about SEL is that it serves as an ideological tool for indoctrination. However, this criticism is only a symptom of a deeper and more complex issue, which is parents'/guardians' and society's concerns about what information and values are taught to students, and who should have control over students' development. As Levinson and Fay (2019) explain, schooling has always involved competing claims about authority, morality, and civic identity, and SEL has become a proxy battleground for these larger concerns. Thus, educators must refine how SEL is implemented while also engaging with the philosophical and ethical questions that shape education's purpose. These questions often remain implicit within political resistance, yet they are central to the broader tensions surrounding curriculum, identity, and authority in schools.

As a note of clarification, by refining how SEL is implemented, I mean communicating its purpose in ways that resonate directly with families' and communities' purpose of education and of their shared vision for a healthy student and community. In simple terms, it means advocating for SEL as education for a better world (Pentón Herrera et al., forthcoming) and as pedagogical approaches that cultivate the competencies needed for democratic life, human flourishing, and collective

well-being (Pentón Herrera, 2024b; World Economic Forum, 2025). One concrete step is to frame SEL through shared human values such as leadership, responsibility, and cooperation, rather than through vocabulary commonly used in politicized discourses (e.g., justice, equity, diversity, etc.). Educators, researchers, and policymakers have a responsibility to communicate that SEL is a pedagogical approach grounded in whole-child development and relational learning (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This work involves aligning SEL with educational values already recognized within communities, such as kindness, respect, and civic responsibility. When SEL is presented through simple explanations, instead of through technical or academic terms that feel detached from parents and guardians' everyday hopes for their children (e.g., references to competency clusters, framework alignment, or evidence-based implementation models), it becomes easier to foster cross-ideological support and reduce resistance rooted in misinformation.

Trust-building is also essential in the effort to move forward. Resistance to SEL can be understood as an invitation to foster dialogue, clarify intentions, and seek collaborative understanding. Transparent conversations with stakeholders about the goals and practices of SEL create space for co-design and shared ownership. When SEL is framed as education for building a better community and preparing students to thrive as ethical, productive, and responsible members of society, the conversation moves from abstraction to shared purpose. In addition, including community voices during both planning and implementation allows SEL to reflect cultural and contextual realities (Jagers et al., 2018). In parallel, academic researchers can support these efforts by sharing findings in accessible language, helping bridge the gap between research and practice. These steps help us reframe SEL as a collective educational vision rather than a rigid intervention. Advancing SEL in this way requires ongoing relational work in the form of nurturing trust, fostering shared commitment, and supporting the development of emotionally aware and socially responsible learners across all educational spaces.

In a similar vein, it is vital for scholars and institutions in the SEL field (i.e., professionals working with SEL, SEL researchers, etc.) to clearly separate themselves from any side of politics. This is, of course, easier said than done, as education and politics are difficult to disentangle (Levinson & Fay, 2019; Meyer, 2017). Nevertheless, the purpose behind, and the wording used in the descriptions about and advocacy for SEL must remain distinct from discourse used in either side of the aisle. A possible way to do this is by keeping SEL practices focused on the individual while emphasizing the link between personal growth and responsibility to one's immediate community. While much of the discourse around SEL, particularly in the CASEL framework, has centered on interpersonal competencies and the vocabulary of progressive social justice, a complementary framing is needed: positioning SEL as the cultivation of actionable skills that help students contribute responsibly to their communities in tangible ways. This means encouraging practices such as volunteering, civic participation, and service-learning projects, which build dispositions of ethical decision-making and civic responsibility for the benefit of students as well as the benefit of those around them. In simple terms, SEL advocacy should capitalize on the message that, through SEL, learners can become a beneficial force for their community and those around them, including nature and animals, and avoiding SEL goals that align with politicized discourse.

In addition, SEL should be integrated with an increased attention to physical well-being, as research demonstrates the close interconnection between physical and emotional health, and learning outcomes (Basch, 2011; Singh et al., 2012). Promoting physical exercise and movement, healthy (and health) routines, conversations about food health and nutrition, and active play makes SEL a whole-child approach. As I am writing this, I recognize there are publications about the importance of physical health (or health education) in SEL (e.g., Saldutti et al., 2024); however, these conversations are, for the most part, tangential in the SEL scholarship, and my point is that they need to lead SEL discussions.

Framing SEL as the essential skill set for becoming a healthy individual (physically and emotionally), as well as a responsible, contributing citizen in one's community, helps depoliticize SEL and make it accessible across ideological divides. In doing so, SEL can be communicated not as a political tool, but as a developmental necessity for students' personal success, physical-emotional well-being, and the resilience of their communities.

If all else fails and ideological divisions around SEL seem too deep to overcome, conversations can begin with simple yet powerful questions:

- How can we prepare students to succeed in building a better community and world?
- What skills do students need to succeed in their present as students and in their future as professionals?
- In what ways and what actions can students take to benefit their community?
- What skills and values do students need to reduce (or prevent) poverty, violence, and vandalism in our communities?

Social and emotional competencies will inevitably surface when responding these questions whether or not they are labeled as such. This is the core truth that critics must be invited to recognize: learning is not a purely cognitive act. Rather, it is a dynamic and relational process in which cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions are deeply intertwined (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2011). We do not learn in isolation from what we feel or from those around us. Thus, SEL is not an add-on or agenda; it is the very foundation of meaningful education. Reframing SEL in this way can shift the narrative from conflict to connection, and from politicization to shared purpose.

*Final thoughts*

Before accepting the criticisms levied against SEL, it is important to ask: Who are the people making these claims? Of those who claim SEL is ideological overreach or indoctrination, how many are active teachers? How many have experience implementing SEL in diverse classrooms? And how many truly understand the relational, emotional, and cognitive complexities of teaching and learning? These questions matter because much of the resistance to SEL is shaped not by pedagogical experience, but by abstract fears and political narratives. Teachers, who live the emotional and social realities of classrooms daily, know that SEL is not a luxury or a political project—it is a pedagogical necessity. When SEL is implemented with care, cultural awareness, and transparency, it strengthens—not replaces—academic learning. Yet, teachers' voices are often sidelined in debates about what happens in classrooms. If we are serious about understanding SEL's role in education, we must center those who know what it means to teach human beings, not just deliver content.

As Zhao (2020) aptly reminds us, "all education is grounded in particular values" (p. 47). There is no such thing as a value-neutral curriculum or an apolitical classroom. In this article, I have made clear that my values—my ideology, if we must call it that—are grounded in care, connection, human dignity, and the hope of building a more emotionally intelligent and peaceful world. If critics wish to challenge SEL, they too must name their values. Are criticisms and critics advocating for emotional silence, control, and obedience? Do their values allow space for multiple ways of being, knowing, and feeling? Are they interested in happiness, harmony, and safety in their communities? Or do they demand (or force) uniformity and compliance? Just as SEL must be critically examined, so must the assumptions of its detractors. The question is not whether education should reflect values—it always does. The question is whose values we uphold, and whether those values allow students to flourish academically, emotionally, socially, and ethically in the world they are inheriting from us.

I began this article by sharing my experiences in Cuba, where

censorship and indoctrination leave little room for questioning, empathy, or emotional growth. As I write these final words, I am also reminded of those early lessons and of how indoctrination turned Cuba into a society stripped of love: love for freedom, for respect and dignity, and for the emotional lives of its people. Returning to those memories underscores why the politicization of SEL matters so deeply. When societies treat social and emotional growth as something to be silenced or controlled, education becomes a tool for compliance rather than liberation. This, I fear, will be our next great battle in education around the world: whether we are brave enough to choose education for freedom, or allow education to be bent toward compliance and control.

I would like to end this article by stating that this manuscript is not meant to close the conversation, but to open it. The politicization of SEL is not a passing controversy; it is part of a larger, ongoing negotiation over what kind of education we value, and what kind of future we imagine. For this reason, it is critical that we continue exploring these tensions and possibilities together, across roles, contexts, and communities. I hope that this piece will contribute to the creation of spaces—scholarly and dialogic—where educators, researchers, and other stakeholders can continue to reflect on the place of SEL in education, especially amid political polarization and misinformation. My hope is that, by beginning this work, I will help contribute to a broader, collaborative conversation in the field that honors SEL's complexity, contextual nature, and transformative potential.

## Impact statement

This article explores how social-emotional learning (SEL) is being misrepresented and politicized in public discourse. Drawing on global and personal experiences, it shows how critics often distort SEL using propaganda tactics to discredit its purpose. The article clarifies what SEL truly is—an essential, culturally grounded approach to human development—and offers practical steps for educators, researchers, and policymakers to reclaim the narrative. It invites public dialogue on SEL's role in supporting emotional literacy, democratic values, and student well-being in diverse communities.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

I declare no conflicts of interest related to the content of this manuscript.

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