

## A Book Review of Hulen, T. A., & Lipsett, A.-B. (2022). Building Blocks for Social-Emotional Learning: Creating Safe, Secure, and Successful Elementary Schools

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### Article Info

Received: January 17, 2024

Accepted: March 7, 2024

Published: May 31, 2024

 303/repam.2024.7

### How to cite

Oyenuga, T. T. (2024). A Book Review of Hulen, T. A., & Lipsett, A.-B. (2022). Building Blocks for Social-Emotional Learning: Creating Safe, Secure, and Successful Elementary Schools. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 6(1), 303-307.

<https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2024.7>

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### ABSTRACT

This book review explores Hulen and Lipsett's (2022) Building Blocks for Social-Emotional Learning: Creating Safe, Secure, and Successful Elementary Schools. The review focuses on the practical relevance of the book in reshaping contemporary educational perspectives on integrating academics and social-emotional learning in mainstream curriculum. Furthermore, the review discusses Hulen and Lipsett's social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies, its core strengths and weaknesses, and the practicality of the authors' insights. The review concludes with suggestions and considerations for teachers and other stakeholders looking to read the book for practical approaches to adopting SEL in the classrooms.

### KEYWORDS

Curriculum; elementary school; social-emotional learning; students' behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

Emerging research in mainstream curriculum and instruction is reshaping the perspective of prioritizing high-stakes testing. Consequently, conversations on the dichotomy between academics and social-emotional learning (SEL) have evolved beyond SEL being a secondary consideration. Although SEL still seeks comparable recognition to literacy and numeracy, new concerns involve strategies for promoting SEL in schools to support students' learning, foster their sense of safety and belonging, and impact behavior. One primary concern is how teachers grapple with setting teaching objectives that balance the students' social-emotional and academic needs. This imbalance continues to challenge the effectiveness and sustainability of the SEL framework, suggesting a need for informed practices. In response, Hulen and Lipsett (2022) introduce evidence-based strategies in their book *Building Blocks for Social-Emotional Learning: Creating Safe, Secure, and Successful Elementary Schools* for elementary educators to integrate both practices seamlessly. They maintain that teachers do not require additional time for SEL amid their demanding schedules. Therefore, Hulen and Lipsett's (2022) book addresses the problem of insufficient resources and introduces ideas to establish a schoolwide foundation for SEL. This review assesses the strengths, weaknesses, and practicality of the authors' strategies for integrating SEL into academics. It also offers suggestions for teachers and others seeking to implement the ideas in the book.

While introducing their SEL model, Hulen and Lipsett (2022) note two instrumental pathways to success. Firstly, professional learning communities (PLCs) are agents for achieving effective and sustainable SEL practices. They describe PLCs as a collaborative team of teachers doing the necessary work to ensure high-level learning for all students (p. 47). Schools working as PLCs foster a safe and secure learning environment through a deep-rooted positive school culture and healthy climate (pp. 48-49). Secondly, early practices in SEL rest on five components, which they call the building blocks, and include a sense of self, reciprocal engagement, social awareness, social-emotional regulation, and logical and responsible decision-making (pp. 9-11). Irregularities in any of these components result in noticeable behavioral problems. Hence, a collaborative PLC community and adequate understanding of the building blocks prevent educators from inadvertently going through the motions of SEL without genuinely fostering a safe and secure learning environment for students.

Hulen and Lipsett (2022) demonstrate their knowledge of the SEL framework through chapters one to three. In Chapter One, they exhaustively explain how students' neuropsychological states, individual development, and executive functioning skills influence behaviors. An essential takeaway for educators from this chapter is the implication of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are reshaping the discourse in education by bringing attention to the influence of adverse experiences on students' well-being and academic performance. Noting what ACEs mean for educators, Hulen and Lipsett (2022) shift the conversation from potential overwhelm to the design of a safe environment. Chapters Two and Three outline detailed considerations for creating this safe environment through a positive

schoolwide culture and healthy climate, reflecting on the benefits of differentiated lessons and diversity. The strength of these chapters rests on the premise that SEL is not a standalone curriculum (p. 159). This argument is crucial because schools omit some critical SEL elements and teach SEL in isolation or in controlled environments. The danger of this approach is that students may struggle to apply SEL skills in different real-life contexts.

Chapters Four to Six are practical applications of information from the preceding chapters. These chapters outline inherent values and considerations for teaching SEL. For instance, Chapter Four introduces ten practices to contextualize SEL concepts and support students' genuine understanding. One of them is SEL journal writing, a practice for students to reflect on the SEL competencies they have learned. It is an effective strategy because it clarifies students' thoughts and emotions, creates self-awareness, and internalizes learning. The authors strengthen the ten practices in Chapter Five through lesson planning considerations that include the learning process, product, and environment. Likewise, Chapter Six considers creating unbiased SEL assessments—a dicey discourse—and carefully provides tips for educators and support staff. Although SEL assessments are challenging to develop because they are susceptible to biases, they are essential because they reveal the students' development and response to SEL lessons. Hulen and Lipsett (2022) posit that collaborative efforts are the most valuable asset to incite appropriate adaptations.

Tracy A. Hulen and Ann-Bailey Lipsett are education specialists with years of experience in social-emotional learning. They work directly with children, families, and schools to foster positive social-emotional experiences. They reflect these experiences throughout the book (pp. 16, 84). Their lived experiences are an asset. For example, Ann-Bailey's participation in the University of Massachusetts-Boston's fellowship program influences how they interpret the relationship between child development and social-emotional capacities—as a developmental process. Similarly, the authors use empirical research to inform their SEL framework substantively. The building blocks integrate works from the CASEL<sup>1</sup> and Harvard University's EASEL<sup>2</sup> lab to support, strengthen, and sustain suggestions for school SEL practices. Hulen and Lipsett's experiences and research lend credibility to the book, making it practical and applicable.

A core strength of the book is its focus on social-emotional competencies as a developmental process. Hulen and Lipsett's (2022) reminder that social-emotional skills build on themselves and continue throughout a child's life addresses educators' tendency to overlook the profound influence of developmental stages on classroom behavior. By arguing that the first step to integrating SEL into academic instruction is viewing SEL as a developmental process, Hulen and Lipsett (2022) demonstrate the need for educational practices to attune themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

<sup>2</sup> The Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning.

to the developmental appropriateness of students. The authors also highlight the importance of cultural responsiveness in SEL programs. They argue that each child's reality varies from one background to another. Hence, integrating culturally and contextually responsive practices ensures SEL programs' equity, justice, and humanity. This perception aligns with Trawick-Smith's (2022), who notes that cultural variations play a huge role in social and emotional competencies (pp. 400-409).

Additionally, Hulen and Lipsett (2022) supplement the book's efficacy with the distinctive use of vignettes at the beginning of each chapter to enhance readability and engagement. Including these brief, illustrative narratives effectively sets the tone for each chapter, captures the reader's interest, and provides a tangible context for the ensuing discussions. Beyond mere stylistic appeal, the integration of vignettes bridges the gap between theoretical concepts and real-world applications. This ingenuity fosters a deeper understanding of the authors' perspectives. It also makes the content more accessible and reinforces the practical relevance of the book.

However, the authors do not acknowledge typical nuances that can potentially affect the optimal integration of SEL and academics, such as teacher shortages, disproportionate allocation of school resources, and marginalized or underserved communities. These nuances plague every society. For instance, teacher shortages in the United States are alarming. The Florida Education Association (FEA) records 10,771 advertised vacancies, comprising 6,006 positions for teachers and 4,765 positions for support staff (FEA, 2022). These teacher shortages make larger class sizes prevalent or imminent. Therefore, adapting some SEL transition strategies (p.163) may work poorly in larger classes, challenging Hulen and Lipsett's (2022) assertion that it is possible to adapt SEL instruction with less time. In addition, schools with limited opportunities may not conveniently apply the strategies. For instance, the authors identify PLCs as a core foundation for SEL strategies, including lesson planning. Not every school functions as a PLC, especially in underserved communities with limited opportunities for teacher collaboration. Other schools need more resources for SEL activities involving "interactive whiteboards" (p.179). While teachers can still work around these nuances, more integrative ideas are required to implement SEL efficiently in all schools.

Furthermore, the book may not have explicitly addressed the influences of student temperament, but this dynamic is present and essential. Inherent personality traits influence students' acceptance, interpretation, and response to SEL strategies. For instance, a naturally enthusiastic and social student can easily engage in SEL activities compared to an introverted student. Consequently, teachers may approach the strategy in the book openmindedly, knowing that students' temperaments exist, but they can tailor SEL strategies to resonate with students' unique characteristics.

Although social-emotional learning stands in stark contrast to rote learning, SEL strategies can degrade into rote learning over time. Rote learning is a repetitive, mundane process that does not foster genuine comprehension or critical thinking. SEL strategies can

become rote learning because they are susceptible to teachers' consistency, motivation, and creativity. For instance, the "SEL Daily Routines" (p.170) can become repetitive and mundane if teachers are unmotivated, inconsistent, or less creative. One contributing factor to teachers' disengagement is emotional baggage, which may influence SEL strategies such as behavior modeling. The authors do not address these influences. However, they prompt further discussion for all education stakeholders regarding enabling and sustaining teachers' motivation, consistency, and creativity to achieve SEL's maximum benefit and purpose.

*Building Blocks for Social-Emotional Learning* is relevant to elementary educators, school psychologists or counselors, curriculum development specialists, and others seeking ideas to blend academics with SEL. Its resourcefulness prompts essential questions about how we want students to learn, the adults we aim to produce, and the values we seek to disseminate in society. These questions are critical because they define the science of our time, which future generations can later describe as impactful or dysfunctional. Yet, it is essential to note that when approaching the strategies in the book, educators must remember that SEL is an experiential, contextual, and progressive practice. Its purpose is not to teach compliance and gain control in the classroom; neither is it to stratify students as good or bad. SEL equips students with emotional and social safety to take academic risks and acquire transferable skills. Thus, the strategies are welcoming approaches to the affective domain of teaching and learning.

In conclusion, Hulen and Lipsett (2022) have written a timely book addressing the false dichotomy between SEL and academics. However, it is essential to recognize that there is no universally applicable approach to social-emotional learning. Instead, research presents stakeholders with suggestions and recommendations, while the implementation ultimately rests on the teacher's discretion. The book presents stakeholders in education with these suggestions and significantly contributes to the discourse on effective teaching and curriculum practices.

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