CHAPTER 1

Social and Emotional Intelligences
The Roots of Becoming

1.1 Shared Existence

The social worlds of humans are filled with complexities, politics, norms, values, cultures, nuance, and meanings; animal societies are no different. Each being lives by its phenomenal nature, whether it reveals itself in the grace of animal individuality, through the song of a bird, or in the creative workings of human beings.

Each species on Earth must be flexible in adapting to its environment so that challenges can be overcome effectively (de Waal, 2016). A bird may critically think about how to use a stick to reach a food source, or a human may need to engage in play to foster neuroplasticity to innovate a solution to a challenge, such as crossing a body of water. Adaptation and flexibility mean using intelligences and cognitive abilities, yet these capacities cannot be understood by comparing humans and nonhuman animals, as has been historically done in the cognitive sciences. Humans cannot measure other life forms by their standards because this neglects the shared essences of the phenomenon of intelligence. If they do, it most often reveals the perceptual limitations of scientific inquiry.

In particular, an organism's development of emotional capacities is integral to its survival, adaptation, growth, and expression of its nature. The emotional capabilities of life have evolved over hundreds of millions of years. As Bateson (2000) described:

> *Somatic change is absolutely necessary for survival*. Any change of environment which requires adaptive change in the species will be lethal unless, by somatic change, the organisms (or some of them) are able to weather out a period of unpredictable duration, until either appropriate genotypic change occurs (whether by mutation or by redistribution of genes already available in the population), or because the environment returns to the previous normal. (p. 348; italics in original text)

Emotions are a guide to the change and unpredictability of life.

From a historical standpoint, the contributions of evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin (1809–1822) explored the emotions of humans and animals. Darwin, among other scientists in the nineteenth century, was open to understanding animals as having greater intelligence than that believed by science. From an evolutionary perspective, emotions have helped certain community-oriented species propagate genes by fostering cooperation and prosocial behavior, as well as strengthening social bonds (Bekoff, 2007). Emotions develop connections with other life forms and environments through meaningful relationships.

Yet, contention from scholars, such as the evolutionist Ernst Mayr, maintained that animals are ignorant, animated objects or automatons that are not capable of emotional experience, and humans are the epitome of evolutionary intelligence (de Waal, 2016). Although science is meant to deepen understanding and explore the unknown, there are scientists who cling to what they already believe, even without empirical evidence. For example, some continue to ignore the fact that primates in the Hominidae family (e.g., bonobos and chimpanzees), which are large and have flat chests, are close genetic cousins to humans: There is only a 1.2 percent genetic difference in DNA makeup (de Waal, 2016). Scientists hold on to arguments from days passed, when it was socially unacceptable for humans to be compared to animals because animals must be perceived to be of lesser value, ability, and intelligence if humans were to be special. According to Bekoff (2007), "my suspicion is that 'doubt' about animal emotions is espoused not because it serves science but because it protects the emotional needs of the scientist" (p. 116).

Although some researchers in the scientific community seek to prove human exclusivity of emotions, thought, and intelligence, there are consistent results from neuroscientific studies that animals, such as rats, just like humans, engage in play. Findings reveal that during play, the brain's chemistry changes, such as with the release of dopamine, making it an emotional activity (Bekoff, 2007). Play fosters neuroplasticity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and emotional expression such as joy. As current research instruments are developed and created, investigations are revealing that humans are not alone in the experience of emotions.

Although human beings share many features of emotions with other organisms, they are a species with unique motivations to alter environmental contexts. As Bronowski (1973) described, "among the multitude of animals which scamper, fly, burrow and swim around us, man is the only one who is not locked into his environment. His imagination, his reason, his emotional subtlety and toughness, make it possible for him not

to accept the environment but to change it" (p. 19). Within these changes, human societies developed their complexities of challenges, especially in modern real-life and virtual worlds. The consequences have come in the form of pandemics, wars, cyberattacks, economic instability, and global warming, which are issues that have global effects. Human beings are responsible for these issues.

Social and emotional demands are ever-increasing, complicated, and potentially overwhelming as advances in technology change how people live, work, make meaning, and relate to others. Virtual worlds are no longer a supplement to real life but have become a social sphere that has its own norms, values, expectations, and emotional triggers (Kazanjian, 2024). Coping with these virtual stressors and finding ways to overcome challenges means working together as a human community, where managing emotional states is critical to supporting growth.

Emotion regulation in the context of navigating real and virtual social spheres means developing habits that seek out positive stressors to facilitate passing through thresholds of personal growth. Positive social stress (also known as eustress) can come from opportunities to exercise abilities, such as giving workshops for community members, volunteering, or working toward academic goals. In contrast, negative stress may come from a confrontation with a disgruntled coworker, trauma, victimization, exclusion, toxic relationships, or failure to achieve a meaningful career opportunity. When personal resources outweigh environmental demands, they can transform into anxiety, sadness, guilt, core shame, or fear. Actively coping with failures and negative stress means acquiring resources and developing skills to manage emotional states.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused overwhelming negative stressors as people were forced into isolation due to restricted socialization policies. Many developed social anxiety and existential terror, where the fear of contagion kept people away from others to protect themselves and their loved ones from death. Societies worldwide entered states of emergency and remained quarantined, which meant that some individuals could not escape domestic abuse and violence (Blumenthal, 2023). Those classified as essential workers were required to venture out into dangerous conditions to perform their duties. Cultivating psychological well-being during periods of extreme stress, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, relies on resilience, awareness, and emotion regulation. Greater levels of emotional awareness and regulation support the coping strategies that mitigate anxiety (Goodlet et al., 2022).

The skills and abilities to engage with intense emotional states were explored in mid-1960s psychology but entered popular culture in 1995 following the publication of Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence*, which argued that emotional intelligence is based upon a foundation of self-awareness, self-management, relationship management, and social awareness. Over the years, the concept developed, with *emotional intelligence* (EI) describing a person's abilities and traits that allow them to manage and express emotions in ways that are aligned with social norms, so that they can identify emotions, regulate cognition, create meaning, make responsible decisions, and develop interpersonal skills (Cardona-Isaza et al., 2022; Jyoti & Singh, 2022; Karande et al., 2022). The EI concept also entails the ability to understand others' emotional states, which involves empathy, perceiving the feelings of others, self-awareness, and emotion regulation (Alsulami, 2022). People discover more about themselves as they learn how others perceive their emotional expressions – this feedback is important data to adapt emotional expression and regulation. Contemporary research in EI has two dominant models: trait and ability (Walter & Routray, 2022). The ability model of EI argues that EI can be developed, such as effective communication strategies or identifying emotions. The trait model indicates that EI is an aptitude related to one's personality.

Models of EI have impacted the US public education system in order to promote student wellbeing and develop academic success (Iqbal et al., 2022). For students, EI addresses maladaptive behaviors and seeks to prevent them through strategies that create deeper levels of self-awareness and motivation, emotion management, and optimism. The real-life application of EI helps students manage academic and social stressors, mitigate test anxiety, solve problems, and overcome life challenges.

However, although EI trait and ability models may serve institutional, company, or therapeutic goals for training and skills, the field of research has many confounds and misunderstandings. This is because of the lack of phenomenological research that explores the essences of emotions as phenomena, instead of solely through a cognitive or behavioral lens. There is still much confusion for how researchers define an emotion. How can one quantify results and standardize approaches to phenomena as diverse and mystic as the universe itself? The contexts and subjectivities of emotional experience are integral to understanding, and the impermanence and flow of life cannot adhere to static definitions or research instruments that are not aligned with the living moment.

Understanding emotions from a purely quantified, scientific classification/model or clinical setting can disconnect one from understanding phenomena. Many studies create extreme emotional distress in an animal to understand the nature of an emotion, such as fear or the phenomenon of memory. For example, research scientists will test mice's memory under what the animals perceive as life-threatening stress (i.e., the Morris water maze) to observe memory demonstrations. Most animal testing involves food deprivation, especially for understanding learning. As de Waal (2016) considered:

> Think about your own life: absorbing the layout of a city, getting to know new friends, learning to play the piano or do your job. Does food play much of a role? No one has ever proposed permanent food deprivation for university students. Why would it be any different for animals? Harry Harlow, a well-known American primatologist, was an early critic of the hunger reduction model. He argued that intelligent animals learn mostly through curiosity and free exploration, both of which are likely killed by a narrow fixation on food. (p. 35)

Why do scientists feel that emotional phenomena can only be understood in the face of intense stressors or artificial environments? Mice and monkeys are often used in such experiments to better understand how humans experience phenomena, yet the animals are always removed of dignity and value, especially when it comes to equal comparisons.

Even when animals are observed in their natural settings, scientists continue to make clear distinctions between animal and human intelligence. Although it is difficult for humans to perceive emotions through facial expressions on certain animals, such as fish or birds, it does not mean they do not have feelings or emotions. A growing number of studies have found evidence that birds and fish have intelligence and display emotions in other ways (Bekoff, 2007). The limitations of scientific instruments and inquiry also reflect the perceptual limits of human beings.

Schools of cognitive psychology and biology reinforce distinctions in human and animal intelligence when animals demonstrate mental achievements similar to humans. Animal achievement is often seen as a lower form of intelligence. This is important to think critically about because humans cannot judge animal behavior or emotional observations from their human perspective. Measuring and comparing brain sizes does little to help one understand the phenomena of emotions because it is not what is different, such as sizes of limbic systems, that can help us understand emotions but what we share with animals. For instance, the brain of a dog is smaller than

humans but both experience empathy, loneliness, and joy (Bekoff, 2007; de Waal, 2016).

By engaging with the limits of EI, the concept has evolved into what is called social and emotional intelligences (SEI) to place the phenomena of emotions within social contexts, relationships, and differing cultural paradigms. This concept appreciates the infinite amount of nuance and subjectivity, and that there is always something new to be discovered. Furthermore, emotions are not isolated within the person but can only exist within relationships. The study of SEI is relatively new in Western psychology, but recent research has demonstrated that developing SEI has growth-promoting effects on subjective wellbeing (Alsulami, 2022).

To provide an operational definition, *social and emotional intelligences* are a spectrum of abilities associated with holistic processes of emotional experience, developing self-awareness for the phenomena of emotions, emotion regulation, discovering social awareness and empathy, freedom of choice, and forming diverse relationships (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Kazanjian, 2023; Thomson & Carlson, 2017). Although this definition appears similar to EI, the focus is on the emotional experience within relationships and expanding the limits of what subjective emotional intelligence could mean in sociocultural and environmental contexts.

The word *intelligences* is pluralized for this book because there are many forms of intelligences and abilities, and expressions cannot be limited to one singular definition or expression of intelligence. Models and theories of intelligence are limited by the boundaries of theory and cultural paradigms. Pluralizing SEI opens possibilities for further elaborations and growth. Just as intelligence opens possibilities, so does our understanding of this phenomenon; as Bohm and Peat (1987) explained:

> This notion of *intelligence*, which acts as the key creative factor in the formation of new categories, can be contrasted with the *intellect*. The past participle of *intelligere* is in fact *intellect*, which could then be thought of as "what has been gathered." Intellect, therefore, is relatively fixed, for it is based primarily on an already existing scheme of categories. While the intelligence is a dynamic and creative act of perception through the mind, the intellect is something more limited and static. This distinction can be highlighted by suggesting that the IQ test should be more properly said to measure an intellect quotient than an intelligence quotient. (p. 114)

The creative and dynamic acts of relating with others, experiences of empathy, expressing states, or exploring and managing an emotional state will always be more than what categorization or standardized criteria

hold. More than just behaviors, knowledge, and skills, SEI depend upon subjects in unique contexts where phenomena are experienced, expressed, and explored. Although strategies are acted on and observed, the experience of SEI cannot be reduced to part function to obtain specific results or fit something into a category.

1.1.1 Subjects in Contexts

Throughout a lifespan, SEI have unique developmental periods that reflect the organism's interests, abilities, and contextual demands. The subjective aptitudes, social and environmental relationships, and developmental windows are integral for the potentials of the phase to be actualized. For example, a baby's SEI is largely influenced by relational factors involving empathic caregivers and a growth boost in right-hemisphere brain development. Within eighteen months, the baby learns "hand-eye coordination, crawling, and walking – all while becoming acquainted with the world. Countless early interactions shape right-brain circuitry so we can recognize and react to the people around us, our sense of safety and danger, and our ability to regulate our emotions" (Cozolino, 2014, p. 64). Babies need emotional interaction, love, care, and empathy from caregivers to stimulate development and actualize potentials for lifelong wellbeing.

The complexity of SEI increases with age (especially during mid to late young adulthood). People seek to establish deep relationships with others and take on greater social demands as they grow. When SEI are cultivated through developmental windows, studies have shown that these young people exhibit higher levels of effective communication and are able to manage and dissolve conflicts, develop relationships, and overcome adversities (Jyoti & Singh, 2022). Children may have more complex levels of SEI than what developmental psychology has historically argued. Yet the trend is to believe that as people age, their abilities to manage emotions develop (Arias et al., 2022).

At any age, humans and animals learn to appraise complex, demanding environmental or social situations and their corresponding positive or negative emotional states (Jeong & Lee, 2022). Managing intense emotions means coping with and overcoming stressful situations, which are skills that translate into creating future positive or growth-promoting encounters in complex environments or challenges. Thus, SEI become a buffer against emotional disturbances and negative interpersonal encounters, as they provide resources, such as self-awareness and regulation, wherein personal and social resources decrease and demands increase.

It may be that SEI continue to be discussed as an individual trait (an influence from models of EI), where some naturally possess these skills and others may not. Within this idea, SEI have been referred to as a character trait for managing daily emotional experiences (Batista et al., 2022). Reports have shown that those scoring higher on SEI scales are believed to be better at coping with stress and conflict, managing emotional states, and relating with others.

However, the trait-based SEI arguments lead to a deficit paradigm for many living beings. This results in categorization processes that place people and other forms of life in a sort of SEI hierarchy. Although arguments for SEI as a trait appear convincing, a different vantage point reveals that emotions and skills to manage them are not distinctly unique, as if SEI were something to be entirely obtained or based in one's genetic predisposition. Emotions are not separate from the human or nonhuman animal but are a facet of the organism's nature that resonates with a real or imagined experience. Each being has innate abilities to seek opportunities and knowledge to more deeply understand emotions and manage them in ways that align with personal goals. Just as a person is an expression of the universe, so are emotions. Everywhere, life flows with SEI.

It must be acknowledged that understanding emotions cannot be fully contained to biological or neuroscientific explanations because certain emotions do not represent any evolutionary advantage, such as grief (Bekoff, 2007). Neuroscientific studies are important for understanding how the brain facilitates certain emotional experiences, but the information may not be as profound as they make it be believed – while mapping brain areas is important for developing the brain's geography, it does not often explain why these processes are happening (de Waal, 2016). A newborn is not a set of algorithms to satisfy needs but rather a life that needs genuine relationships from an empathic and caring community.

Within human history, Arias et al. (2022) argued that in many Western cultures, "human beings have always been considered rational, leaving the emotional world in the background. But this way of understanding the human being is incomplete, since emotions are present in all the acts and moments of our life" (pp. 1–2). Western cultures have traditionally devalued emotions as primitive, instead favoring reason and logic as the highest forms of intelligence. This is a limited view of human evolution. In reality, no action, decision, or discovery is made without emotions because they enable action or motivation.

Furthermore, emotions are understood differently given the academic field, cultural paradigm, or theoretical orientation, which influences the

perceptive meanings of SEI (Walter & Routray, 2022). For example, neuroscience may understand emotions solely as responses to environmental or internal triggers and focus on the neurobiological changes or activities in the brain (Arias et al., 2022). Or, from a cultural perspective, what may be healthy in one culture may be considered abnormal in another – cultural relativity defines how SEI can be explored, expressed, and passed on. Although SEI are ubiquitous, the meanings of experiences, social norms, values, and rules are culturally relative. According to Smrtic (2010), "cultural relativism means that what is considered normal is a function of culture and, therefore, varies among cultures" (p. 18). For example, the processes of empathic encounter in a clinical therapeutic setting may include a group of people for some, while others may prefer a single encounter.

The limitations of human perception, cultural paradigm, and research instrumentation preclude understanding SEI. However, remaining sensitive and open to learning with all life forms will only enhance our understanding of emotional phenomena. Depending on a person's social and cultural paradigm and geography, the rules and meanings within SEI differ. Cole and Packer (2011) described that culture

> provides a vast storehouse of tools to think and act with. While such tools/solutions routinely need modification because humans must constantly deal with changing circumstances, human infants do not encounter a world created *de novo* just for them. Rather, theirs is a world culturally prepared to provide them with cognitive resources, just as phylogeny has pre-adapted them to require and acquire such resources. (p. 138)

Culture is infinitely complex, especially in the interconnections of the world today through travel, globalization, immigration, and virtual technologies. It has become common for people to adopt or blend cultural features from other paradigms into their own. Multicultural identities are created when a person speaks more than one language and has ties to different nations or geographies. For those that immigrate to other countries, acculturation may be challenging within the new cultural rules. Young people often find themselves in schools with social and emotional learning programs, where they learn the new rules and norms of SEI in the host country. Often, they become cultural translators or brokers for their families (Valdés, 1996). Cross-cultural research is necessary to provide deeper insights and perspectives within SEI.

Western conceptions and methods to improve SEI have expanded in recent decades due to cross-cultural research, global interaction/distribution

of research literature, globalization, cultural transformations, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in world paradigms. For example, Western psychology has recently come to appreciate mindfulness as part of SEI – an ancient cultural practice found in India, China, and Japan. Research into mindfulness and SEI has shown that when combined, there are growth-promoting and positive effects that each could not achieve separately. As noted by Robinson et al. (2022):

> For mindfulness to have these consequences or correlates, the individual had to be knowledgeable concerning emotions and skilled in ascribing them to particular circumstances. That interactions of this type were so systematic suggests that at least medium levels of emotional ability may be necessary in using the resources that mindfulness provides to become happy and engaged rather than merely less distressed. (p. 784)

Without the focus and engagement promoted by mindfulness, SEI may not be as effective or rewarding. Although SEI and mindfulness have created multibillion-dollar industries, basic research exploring and validating claims needs to catch up to this growing market (Robinson et al., 2022).

1.1.2 Regulation and Compassion

With the rising intensity of global challenges such as environmental destruction or economic instability, SEI are a significant factor in how people perceive and interpret stressors – where negative perceptions may result in catastrophizing, guilt, or denial, accompanied with negative emotional states such as anxiety, hatred, or pessimism (Philips & Bhosale, 2022). Negative perceptual meanings of stressors are more likely to cultivate emotional disturbances that increase the chance of bodily malaise, such as heart disease. There is a need to develop regulation strategies to cope with the growing number of twenty-first-century challenges.

Through emotion regulation, a person determines their motivation to cope, adapt, and overcome intense life challenges (Martskvishvili & Lagidze, 2022). Strategies to manage emotions are meant to alleviate negative emotional states, achieving balance among social and personal spheres to promote overall wellbeing. Individuals that have developed abilities in regulating emotions have been found to have higher scores in assessments of SEI, which is critical for coping with stressful situations. For example, people experienced greater stress during the COVID-19 pandemic's social restrictions and lockdowns, which required equally intense coping methods

to sustain wellbeing. Managing the stress of isolation, threats of contagion, and financial instability required people to assess what was in their control and determine the best way to achieve wellbeing.

Emotional states contain biological or physical changes within the body. These changes can be beneficial, such as faster healing times in states of happiness and joy. Or they can mean deterioration of immune system functions and cell health because of long-term activation of the stress system. For instance, chronic negative emotional states are associated with the onset of coronary artery disease, a condition marked by the buildup of plaque in the arteries and a narrowing that causes restricted blood flow to the heart (Philips & Bhosale, 2022). Patients with coronary artery disease are more susceptible to facing long-term challenges in coping with the negative emotions associated with the disease. The psychological discomfort tends to last longer than the physical aspects of the condition. Maladaptive coping methods for stress increase the chances of mortality for patients with coronary artery disease (Philips & Bhosale, 2022). However, facilitating the development of emotion regulation helps patients discover optimism, hope, resilience, and awe, which are protective factors for heart health and overall wellbeing. Emotion regulation reduces the onset and symptomology of many stress-related disorders and prevents exacerbation of physical malaise.

The person must also exercise self-compassion to experience the holistic (i.e., physical and psychological) benefits of emotion regulation. According to Martskvishvili and Lagidze (2022), "Self-compassion is a healthy and adaptive attitude towards oneself, occurring when one is having a difficult time and includes openness, caring, and kindness; understanding nonjudgmental attitude towards negative traits, and being aware that negative experiences are natural and similar to others' experiences" (p. 109). Within self-compassion, one realizes that positive and negative emotions are essential. Refraining from self-judgment, not overly identifying with others, retaining a sense of individuality, and embracing existential solitude are all vital components. Developing self-compassion means becoming mindful of the deepest parts and workings of the inner self.

1.2 Social and Emotional Learning

From birth through young adulthood, the person has critical developmental opportunities that hold the potential to influence lifelong wellbeing. For example, emotional neglect of a baby has harmful consequences for the immune system, neurodevelopment, and empathy, all of which result in

a lifetime of physical, relationship, and emotional challenges. The unique processes of brain development, such as neurogenesis (the creation of new neurons) and synaptogenesis (interconnections of neurons through the creation of white brain matter), develop at exponential rates during the younger years and taper off during late young adulthood (around twenty-five years). Other formative processes such as apoptosis (the dying off of neurons) and active forgetting (memory consolidation) happen throughout the lifespan, contributing to brain development. These processes do not occur in isolation but are just one facet of development. Brain processes are fundamentally interconnected and integrated with every part of the person's growth.

One might believe that SEI have a peak or final destination, but there is no consensus in the research community for what a perfect or finished product of SEI looks like. Rather, no matter whether young or old, SEI are unique and relevant to the person at every life stage. There are always social and emotional potentials to be discovered throughout the lifespan.

The processes for developing SEI are highly complex, subjective, relational, and contextual, in which generalizations must always come with a litany of exceptions. The debate on whether social and emotional growth is dependent upon the nature or nurturing of the child was replaced by a deeper understanding that both nature and nurture are equally important in development. The term *experience-dependent plasticity* "denotes that our brains are structured and restructured by interactions with our social and natural environments" (Cozolino, 2014, pp. 77–78). It is the social interactions, environments, subjectivities, and genetic potentials that influence whether abilities/potentials are suppressed or developed.

To provide youth with opportunities and environments to actualize their social and emotional potentials, public schools have implemented social and emotional learning. *Social and emotional learning* (SEL) engages with the learning and developmental processes by which personal potentials for SEI are nurtured in school and actualized throughout the lifespan. Through SEL, students are provided with chances to link cognitive abilities with emotional states, as well as to relate skills and lessons to social and emotional contexts (Arias et al., 2022). Emotions are becoming a fundamental and explicit part of the educational curriculum, so it is just as important for students to develop SEI alongside their academic abilities. Still, much of the SEL curriculum focuses on the cognitive aspects of SEL, which refer to the transformation of psychological perception and sensory information of environmental stimuli into understanding, as well

as the ability to apply this understanding in flexible ways that promote adaptation (de Waal, 2016).

The nationwide adoption of SEL programs and curricula in US public schools has resulted from empirical studies that reveal strong correlations with academic success, engagement, and degree completion (Eklund et al., 2018; Garner et al., 2018; Hirsch et al., 2021). However, more studies are needed because existing ones have differing views on definitions and concepts of certain features of SEI. Empathy is one example of this challenge of definition because its nature and essence go beyond quantification and standardization.

Standardized SEL continue to be implemented, but cultural, societal, political, and economic barriers in the Western paradigm limit its success. In addition, there are damaging psychological effects on culturally diverse youth that do not wish to align with the prescriptive Western paradigm of SEI. The curriculum and instruction of SEI may create realities of subjugation and control in the classroom. There are more facets to SEI than just managing one's emotions in order to adhere to the norms and values of the dominant culture. However, as the world becomes more interconnected, multicultural, and interdependent, the perspectives of SEI create a unique dynamic that develop SEL. Nations have become more attuned to the importance of emotions and social skills for preparing youth to engage with a rapidly changing world (although rapid change is not the only justification for SEL) (Bowers et al., 2017; Haymovitz et al., 2018; Lemberger et al., 2018).

The success of the SEL curriculum depends on how it aligns with the culture of the school, students' realities, and the institution's mission statement and values. Moreover, SEL contributes to multicultural educational goals, especially for minorities, marginalized students, and students with special needs (Bowers et al., 2017). To achieve this, SEL must offer equitable developmental opportunities for personal exploration, relationship building, emotional management, and skill training to enable students to complete degrees, set and attain goals, and overcome adversity. To create inclusive SEL, curriculum writers and teachers must incorporate hidden demographics of populations that do not wish to be known or singled out (Jackman et al., 2020). Being identified can be difficult if the person has been victimized or the population is under threat from social or cultural prejudices. According to Wolf and Hulsizer (2011):

> Many groups around the globe are hidden from view due to cultural, religious, or legal structures. For example, in some cultures, adultery may

> result in honor killings, homosexuality is punishable by death or banishment, and certain religious groups face imprisonment. Therefore, these populations often remain hidden as a matter of safety and to avoid oppression. Attempts to include and study such populations are thus difficult. (p. 63)

To include hidden populations in the development of SEL, research surveys and studies must offer sensitive and anonymous demographic identifiers in order to tailor SEL to meet the needs of minority populations.

Many public schools are following the SEL guidelines developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), which defined SEL as the "process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (para. 1). Research studies and meta-analyses have shown that the CASEL model for K-12 schools advances the development of students' skills and abilities in SEI (Bennouna et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2021; Lemberger et al., 2018; Stark et al., 2021). These developments translate into fewer classroom management issues, higher academic achievement, positive habit formation, and the development of a growth-promoting school culture (Thomson & Carlson, 2017; Rowe & Trickett, 2018). For the community, SEL has been found to decrease local government spending on juvenile arrests/corrections, decrease substance abuse, and increase student success and degree completion, which means a workforce with greater skills/abilities (Eklund et al., 2018). When students have skills to manage and appreciate emotions, develop resilience, and form diverse relationships, there are lower rates of emotional disturbances and higher instances of long-term career success and holistic wellbeing, which all decrease social costs (i.e., public healthcare, juvenile corrections) (Jones & Khan, 2017).

Assessed levels of SEI have been shown to be strong indicators for school motivation and student engagement, which involve behavioral habits, cognitions, setting and accomplishing goals, and emotion management (Arias et al., 2022; W. L. Wang, 2022). The abilities associated with SEI are also related to a student's success at focusing, participating, and collaborating with peers. The emotional aspects of academic success include developing and exploring interests, motivation to attain goals, and finding belonging. The cognitive facets involve setting goals and using learning strategies to reach them. Agentic (i.e., a sense of independence or agency) aspects of student engagement include interacting with the learning contexts/environment, which includes asking questions or expressing thoughts

in class. The quality of growth-promoting relationships within the classroom deeply influences these behaviors and nuances.

Teacher–student and peer relationships are positively correlated with the development of students' SEI, in which those with more significant levels of SEI have shown higher engagement in class. In a study of academically gifted adolescents, W. L. Wang (2022) suggested that "the development of appropriate emotional intelligence programs or affective curricula should be a main concern for encouraging the engagement of academically gifted adolescent students in regular classes" (p. 7). Students with deeper levels of cognitive and emotional stimulation develop better study habits, which translates into academic success and learning in diverse learning environments/circumstances (Iqbal et al., 2022). Academic success is supported by self-awareness and motivation, emotion management, and interpersonal skills, all of which engage greater levels of cognitive performance.

In addition, teachers that demonstrate developed SEI enhance SEL for students in the classroom. Modeling is essential as teachers verbalize their emotion regulation, critically think for problem-solving, and describe how they form positive habits for emotional wellbeing (Martyniak & Pelliteri, 2020). This also means demonstrating skills for relationship management, which involve empathy, postponing judgment, showing compassion and care, and openness to expanding perspectives (Goodlet et al., 2022). Teachers' SEI will determine the success of learning facilitation and classroom management. Emotional planning and rehearsals can be helpful strategies for turning SEI concepts into praxis and real-life development (Martyniak & Pelliteri, 2020). In managing classrooms, teachers demonstrate to students how to identify, regulate, and express emotions in growth-promoting ways (Valente et al., 2019). This is important for negative emotions, which can cause many pressures and challenges in the classroom. Modeling cognitive reappraisal, students understand that even the most powerful negative emotion can be regulated. For example, when students are nervous about giving a presentation in front of the class, the teacher may talk them through the anxiety, dispelling the myths that they will be judged or attacked.

Opportunities to model SEI throughout the school year also mean giving students a space to try, succeed or fail, reflect, and master certain skills or abilities (Valente et al., 2019). This cultivates growth-promoting relationships within the classroom and establishes a learning climate where trial and error are accepted parts of self-discovery and growth for SEI. The process of SEL is bidirectional and strengthens student–teacher partnerships. Just as students learn from the teacher, the teacher learns to develop

their own SEI. The informal and formal teacher learning/development in SEI translates into student success (Shafait et al., 2021; Tucker, 2019). Moreover, SEI is the basis for empowering classroom communications and learning experiences.

1.2.1 Facilitating SEL

In the twenty-first century, primary and secondary schools, and institutions of higher education seek to support the development of students' SEI (Martyniak & Pelliteri, 2020; Stark et al., 2021). Each component of SEI correlates with higher academic performance, career development, and overall wellbeing (Shafait et al., 2021). However, some other institutions and practices seek to develop SEI through SEL outside the classroom. This is true for after-school programs, clinical settings, family circles, or recreational sports groups. Facilitating SEL is a sensitive and delicate process to implement and cultivate, as there are many subjective, contextual, and cultural factors.

Within the meaningful experiences of SEL, students learn strategies on how to form meaningful relationships, cooperate with others, regulate negative emotions, manage conflict, and become aware of feelings and emotions (Gresham et al., 2018; Morrish et al., 2018; Valosek et al., 2019; Vidic & Cherup, 2019). The process of SEL develops students' positive attitudes toward the self, encouraging resilience and engaging with new challenges (Joshi & Sokhey, 2021). Understanding and regulating emotions helps carry students through the processes of development and success – which contain frustration and failure.

It is only possible to develop SEI if it has significant value and relevance to the learner, which is why experiential lessons are most effective. *Experiential learning* consists of the processes by which the person learns through active participation in a meaningful educational experience. With experiential SEL, emotions are evoked, explored, and reflected upon to deepen understanding, which helps one transcend older ways of behaving and perceiving. These are the hands-on lessons that most students never forget in their education, from learning how to make choc-oat chip cookies to employing fractions.

Rogers (1969) recommended five guidelines to make experiential learning successful, which are highly relevant to SEL:

- **The experience contains meaningful and high-quality individual participation:** Engaging the whole person means stimulating emotions, cognitions, bodies, and behaviors as fundamental parts of the functioning learning experience.

- **Self-initiated learning:** The direction, limits, stimuli, and guidance may be prompted from external sources, but the learner has an overall feeling that they have the responsibility to engage with the freedom to learn for discovery, exploration, expression, and understanding.
- **Pervasive**: The experience engages with the diversity of characteristics and values deep within the learner. Their behaviors and attitudes make a difference in the experience.
- **Self-evaluation**: The learner understands if the experience is meeting their needs, and if it reflects their curiosities. The learner knows if the experience has provided transcendental enlightenment over the areas unknown to them. The responsibility of evaluation is within the learner.
- **Creating meaning:** Each area of the experience is designed around the learner where they learn to utilize the freedom to create growth-promoting meanings.

These guidelines for facilitators are general enough to be adapted to diverse subjects and contexts. The humanistic psychological foundations of Rogers' (1969) experiential approach are person centered to ensure that learning is relevant to the person's needs, desires, cultural paradigm, and abilities. Lessons that engage students' thoughts, emotions, interests, and motivations (i.e., cognitive engagement) equate to deeper learning because students come to understand how their knowledge and skills align with real-life tasks and challenges (Iqbal et al., 2022).

Facilitating a Rogerian sense of SEL means fostering a climate of empathy, honesty, and value for the learner as a person. Underlying all of these conditions is trust. The facilitator establishes trust by participating in the experiential lessons. They are willing to encounter learners so that they sense and accept their presence (Stark et al., 2021). Sharing one's feelings and emotions does not mean projecting them onto others, but finding a place to show others that they, too, are real persons capable of folly, error, negative emotions, and challenges. The facilitator gains trust by suggesting specific procedures and methods that may be meaningful and helpful in overcoming challenges. The facilitator is motivated by "the trust he feels in the capacity of the group to develop the human potential which exists in that group and its separate members. This trust is something which cannot be faked. It is not a technique" (Rogers, 1969, p. 75). The facilitator must utilize their real presence and personal abilities to establish trust – something that cannot be fabricated, no matter the sophistication.

The facilitator focuses SEL upon the realities and interests of the learners – at the core is learning how to adapt to the constant change in life or impermanence. Learning to appreciate impermanence supports the discovery of unique aspects of the self and a person's relationships with the world. All of the skills and abilities are aligned with a world in constant change and positioned according to the social and emotional needs of the person. The processes of SEL are more important than the knowledge acquired (Rogers, 1969). Learning how to develop is a prerequisite for engaging with the constant flow and uncertainty of a world of infinite complexity. Although static knowledge can be a comfortable and secure place to rest (e.g., "this is how it will always be"), the processes will realign one to the nature of reality – constant flow and transition.

Engaging the whole person means developing an SEL approach that perceives students as living beings, not parts of a whole (i.e., seeking to stimulate an area of the brain for some goal). Cognitive areas are interconnected with/interdependent from emotional regions of the brain, which means that student motivation to learn and discover academic content is equally about emotional awareness and regulation (Arias et al., 2022). Bridging the gap between real life and academic curriculum reveals the necessity for a dynamic SEL. Students are more likely to be motivated when curricular content and lessons are linked to their emotional curiosities and personal realities. In such a scenario, the academic tasks reflect current challenges and interests, fostering deeper senses of abilities for critical thinking, reflection, and cooperative learning. Making SEL part of each lesson augments the learning tasks and personal developmental processes, and it is the facilitator's responsibility to cultivate the soil of growth for the person and the group.

1.3 Considerations for Social and Emotional Equity

Cultural paradigms are important for how SEI are developed. Within a culture's evolution, detrimental or growth-promoting norms, values, or social meanings may highly influence how people understand and finds their place in the world (Barreto et al., 2021; Franssen et al., 2020). Not all cultural features are growth promoting, such as the hyper-individualism found in many Western societies, which do not place high value on empathy or collaboration but rather on competition and isolation. Cultural images of individual success may not be attainable and cause the internalization of failures, decreasing one's self-esteem. There are also many sociocultural barriers or inequities that limit opportunities to

develop SEI, such as in schools challenged with violence or economic hardship, where rote memorization and classroom management are the focus. In some schools, diverse knowledge, cultures, abilities, or demographics are not valued. Such inequity generates feelings of estrangement in the educational experience, which is detrimental to the growth and vitality of SEI.

The benefits of SEL in public schools and higher education are evident, yet issues of inequities are ignored within the academic curriculum. One must question the limitations of the curriculum itself. *Curriculum* is "*conceived of as the tool that structures the accessibility of knowledge in environmental form, where framing and classification, respectively, communicate the accessibility and structure of knowledge*" (Au, 2012, p. 49, italics in original text). A SEL curriculum teaches learners how to conceptualize, classify, explore, and express SEI in their lives. Unfortunately, many SEL curricula are laden with privilege, positions, bias, values, and the privilege of the curriculum writers and teachers that deliver the curriculum.

Creating a critical SEL curriculum means uncovering the dominant cultural paradigm's conception of SEI, which inculcates values, meanings, rules, and norms. Traces of historical, economic, political, and social influence are beneath the instruction and content. For example, when understanding emotions, some lessons may disregard or devalue the emotions of animals, which is not an evident truth but an influence from behaviorist schools of psychology. Teachers and students must critically engage with the SEI paradigm that the curriculum is based on and analyze its intentionality. Are students meant to align themselves (i.e., adapt, comply, or adhere to norms) with a dominant way of being, and for what purposes? A critical curriculum includes differing cultural paradigms and is open to new understandings or potentials of what SEI could mean.

There are histories, abilities, and psychosocial needs of minority, underserved, and marginalized communities that need to be addressed in a SEL curriculum (Stark et al., 2021). The current SEL interventions and services may also not be aligned with the students' cultural paradigms and meanings – ultimately doing more harm than good. Watters (2010) described that for psychologists and patients "the increasingly wide use of the Western diagnostic categories and the many assumptions that lay behind them had the potential of blinding local clinicians to the unique realities of patients in different cultures" (p. 22). Incoming immigrant and resettled youth in schools may need culturally responsive services that meet students' emotional needs in sensitive and relevant ways.

To make SEL more equitable, some programs have implemented a transformative SEL that includes racial and ethnic identities in the curriculum while evaluating positionalities, privileges, and power balances within the widely used CASEL definitions of SEI (Stark et al., 2021). Transforming SEL to have cultural humility opens the curriculum to learn from and value personal experiences, cultural paradigms, and diverse meaning-making processes. Inclusion promotes resources/knowledge which can be used to achieve equity, which results in deeper stimulation of SEI abilities and understandings. Developing SEL means expanding awareness and perspective for what SEI means to people, ultimately deepening the exploration of social and emotional phenomena. Through diverse relationships, students can question how they know things, what they know, and choose to expand their perspectives to help them appreciate the wonder of all forms of life. Schools must provide equitable opportunities for students to access high-quality SEL that is culturally responsive and values their knowledge. This investment will have long-term benefits for the community and the world.

1.3.1 Weathering the Storm

The growth of SEI is influenced by personal, contextual, cultural, and historical factors. If SEL is disconnected from or ignores the realities of youth, then the learning experience can estrange the person from core values and curiosities (MacDonnell et al., 2021). A person's current relationships with the world and others are paramount: SEI cannot be developed in isolation. This is especially so for understanding individuals' barriers and challenges to actualize SEI potentials.

For example, low socioeconomic status has correlations with children's increased exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which have negative influences on lifelong wellbeing, empathy levels, and physical health (Park et al., 2020; Purkey et al., 2020; Tsehay et al., 2020). The term ACEs designates direct or indirect cruelty toward children, which can include abuse (e.g., verbal, physical, sexual), neglect, bullying, discrimination, domestic violence, disaster, displacement, war, victimization, or separation. These experiences and contexts inhibit the development of SEI. Instead, the person may experience anxiety from having food or home insecurities, physical malaise, a limited number of supportive relationships, and unstable home living or learning environments, which are associated with financial instability and economic challenges. For individuals that have such challenges, the contextual and subjective factors need to

be addressed through either therapeutic intervention or preventative/protective SEL programs that are geared toward holistic wellbeing (Houtepen et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2021; Pinchoff et al., 2020).

Children, young adults, and school personnel must be familiar with professional services and organizations designated to help them overcome ACEs and challenges to developing SEI. The challenge is making these services available and providing culturally relevant approaches. Many people find ways to cope with adverse conditions and experiences, some of which will be maladaptive or insufficient to provide therapy or support.

1.4 A Focus on Empathy

Each area of SEI consists of phenomena and cannot exist in isolation. Empathy appears to be at the heart of SEI, having a unique influence on and relationship with each area. Research suggests there is a significant correlation between levels of empathy and the overall development of SEI – where empathy is a growth-promoting factor in altruism, building supportive relationships, and managing prosocial behaviors. Greater empathic abilities also mean less antisocial behaviors in children and young adults. The reverse has also been observed, where young adults with lower empathy levels exhibit more antisocial behaviors in the community. Thus, empathy has a predictive inverse relationship with criminal behavior. Results from a study by Cardona-Isaza et al. (2022) found that "EI and empathy affect decision-making styles and that variables with a higher cognitive component, such as emotional attention and perspective taking, favor rationality in decision-making and contribute to organized processes such as seeking information and evaluation of alternatives" (p. 56). An important aspect of these results indicated that how one interprets distress may lead to maladaptive coping methods, such as hypervigilance or anxiety. Personal distress was associated with empathy when the situation generated emotional discomfort. In these negative aspects of empathy, there is an influence on future decision-making processes (i.e., avoidance, procrastination, impulsive decisions).

The developmental stimulation that comes from an empathic encounter is pervasive; from immune and endocrine responses to neurodevelopment, the entire being is involved. For example, the cognitive pillar of empathy, in particular, cultivates interhemispheric communication – where parts of the brain that were previously disconnected become connected (Hammond, 2015; Olcoń et al., 2021). Imagining another's experience as if it were one's own creates bridges in the brain for understanding another's

experience but also one's own. The greater stimulation between regions (i.e., memory, emotions, language, executive centers) and hemispheres in the brain creates stronger network connections, providing a deeper understanding of complex life situations and new cognitive resources for abilities such as creative thinking. Also, sensory stimuli are processed faster, building upon associations within the world – fostering deeper literacy for interpreting and acting in the world. The differing abilities of SEI are linked to gray brain matter regions and structures that include cortical regions such as the orbitofrontal cortex, insula, cerebellum, gyrus, and ventromedial prefrontal cortex, to name a few (Wang et al, 2021). Empathy helps to interconnect these regions, which develops overall SEI. The person can then experience global effects or benefits, such as mitigating social anxiety.

Emotions are not just external bits of data that need to be processed by the brain. Rather, *emotional experiences are understandings themselves*. The brain is fundamentally part of emotional experience, as the eyes are with the sights they behold. The empathic experience deepens understanding of emotions, and when disengaged from empathy self-reflection generates new personal meanings of emotional experience. The self-awareness that is stimulated by empathic encounters provides opportunities to reflect on privilege, position, and bias – which can be barriers to deeper levels of empathic experience/offerings (Rebar & Heimgartner, 2021). In addition, empathy creates the social awareness to reveal sociocultural realities (i.e., histories, inequities, politics, cultures, economics) that are the contexts of others' lives (Olcoń et al., 2021).

Empathy is the gateway to building relationships with the world and other beings – it is the pathway to creating a meaningful life. Emotions cannot exist without relationships. Therefore, empathy acts as both a guide and an immersive experience in discovering the potentials of self. At each person's core are SEI, helping them navigate a world of uncertainties, growing challenges, and infinite relationships – they are the determining factor if human beings are to realize their inner potentials amid uncertainties and challenges, and ones that are just beyond the rim.