

---

# SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE OF YOUTH IN HONG KONG

A call for action on a comprehensive set of policies  
to nurture youth's social & emotional resilience

---





## Foreword

2020 is a year full of hardships for Hong Kong and its youth. I can imagine the tears shed and frustration faced by youth after a series of painful political disputes and the deadly pandemic COVID-19. It is high time to initiate some changes but how?

One key change in our approach of youth work this year is the emphasis on empathy. We have begun conducting dialogue in public forums and private chats, with the aim of acknowledging the differences between parties, and also attempting to untie some of the knots based on each other's commonality. As of today, we have engaged more than 2,000 speakers, interviewees and audience for this exercise.



Conducting dialogue sessions have been inspiring and fruitful. One of the emerging themes of the dialogues is how we should equip youth with a tough mindset, or “resilience”, a quality that helps one navigate through hardship and challenges. We all agreed that, regardless of the social situations, education should play a critical role in building this essential life quality. We therefore initiated this study entitled “Youth’s Social and Emotional Resilience”, by taking a closer look at the theoretical underpinnings of resilience, analysing the related education approaches and pedagogies, as well as comparing the policies in Hong Kong with different countries in nurturing students’ resilience and social and emotional skills.

We come to a conclusion that, despite the recent increase in different kinds of positive education programmes, Hong Kong is still lagging behind in this regard. We need more emphasis on resilience and social and emotional skills in the curriculum, which could mean bringing in more quality and structured learning opportunities to students. Our aspiration is to see youth to grow up as individuals who have an in-depth understanding of themselves and have the empathy to understand others. With the support of parents and teachers, youth could engage themselves in an environment that is conducive to such values, mindsets and attitudes.

Lastly, the building of a resilience-friendly social environment requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders. Your support is highly relevant to our posterity; and youth’s wellbeing could be crucial to the future of our society. 2020 might not be the best year in history, but it will become better with our solid actions in supporting the youth in Hong Kong.

**Ambrose Wong**  
Researcher, MWYO



# TABLE of CONTENT

---

行政摘要	4
Executive Summary	6
Introduction	10
Key Definitions and Concepts	14
Literature Review on Social and Emotional Learning	22
International Policies and Success Factors	26
Analysis of the Existing Policies and School Support for Social and Emotional Education in Hong Kong	36
Conclusion and the Way Forward	42
Appendix: List of Expert Interviewees	46

---

# 行政摘要

## 制訂全面政策 培養青年社交及情緒抗逆力 刻不容緩

經濟合作與發展組織（OECD）於 2018 年 10 月發表報告，引用「學生能力國際評估計劃」的數據，指出香港 15 歲學生的學術抗逆力居於世界第三，惟社交及情緒抗逆力（Social and Emotional Resilience）排名全球尾五，情況與大部分的國家及經濟體截然不同，因為各地學生的學術抗逆力與社交及情緒抗逆力普遍成正比關係，而兩者更能相輔相成。為何香港的情況會這樣異常？社會又可以如何改善學生的社交及情緒抗逆力？為此，MWYO 青年辦公室採取以下「三部曲」，尋找合適的解決方案。

### 第一步：深入了解「抗逆力」

鑑於社會對抗逆力的理解不全面，此報告會解釋它背後的理論基礎。抗逆力被理解為一個不斷發展的過程，當中涉及個人、家庭、學校和社區之間的風險因素（如遇到創傷和生活壓力）與保護因素（如得到家人愛護和朋輩支持）的互動。當保護因素「戰勝」風險因素時，人即使身處逆境也能適應，亦即是擁有較高抗逆力。

社交及情緒教育（Social and Emotional Learning，簡稱 SEL）與抗逆力息息相關。作為一種學習過程或教育方法，SEL 旨在提升學生的社交及情緒能力（Social and Emotional Competencies），從而培養正面的發展成果和應對風險。SEL 框架中所培育的多項社交能力與抗逆力文獻提及的個別保護因素相近，但 SEL 不單教授社交能力，更包含情緒能力，例如認識自我及情緒、表達及管理情緒等，豐富了抗逆力框架的內涵。此報告將探討 SEL，並就提升學生的社交及情緒抗逆力給予方向性的指引。

### 第二步：從海外的 SEL 政策及案例，總結成功要素

此報告與 OECD 的研究一樣，會作國家之間比較。MWYO 參考了在制訂 SEL 政策和營造支持 SEL 的學校環境方面備受關注的國家和地區，總結它們的經驗，從而得到推動 SEL 的三個主要成功因素：

- **成功因素一：**政府將「社交及情緒能力」列入主要的教育目標；
- **成功因素二：**政府制訂相關政策，要求學校透過特定科目，教授學生社交及情緒能力（即獨立成科模式），及 / 或為校方提供支援幫助，營造有利於建立關係及正面的校園環境（即全校參與模式）；
- **成功因素三：**教育制度外的其他持份者有空間舉辦及試驗 SEL 活動。

值得注意的是，本報告中所選、在推動 SEL 上較出色的國家或地區，不一定能滿足上述所有成功因素。反而，其政府、學界、非政府組織、學校和家長等持份者共同建立能促進 SEL 發展的生態系統（例如透過因素一和三）。

## 第三步：分析香港現時的政策及學校支援

報告按上述的海外成功因素分析香港的教育制度，再結合與專家的訪談內容，得出以下觀察：

成功因素	香港現況
1) 教育政策文件有否將社交及情緒能力作為首要的教育目標？	有限。政策文件中甚少提及社交及情緒能力。
2) (i) 有否透過獨立成科，或在不同科目中教授社交及情緒能力？ (ii) 有否制訂其他強制措施，營造能協助師生和同伴間建立良好關係的校園氣氛？	(i) 有，但只佔課程中的小部分。 (ii) 否。相反局方制訂着重紀律的訓育及輔導模式，與建立關係的理念背道而馳。
3) 教育制度外的持份者有否空間舉辦及試驗SEL活動？	有限。僅有一些學校自願參與了教育局「成長的天空」計劃，或參加SEL及其他相關的活動（如正向教育課程、靜觀課程等）。

總括而言，本港的教育政策未有將社交及情緒能力納入學習目標。儘管近年社會舉辦了更多旨在提升學生身心健康的項目，但由於缺乏對相關概念的深入認識，令推行或擴展SEL項目時面對更大阻力。就學校的教學模式而言，「社交及情緒能力」並沒有獨立成科、或成為某個科目中的重要部分。而事實上，現今教育界受制於傳統重紀律的訓育及輔導模式，與SEL的理念和內容（亦即建立關係）背道而馳。最後，學校由於課堂時間緊迫，沒有足夠空間舉辦及試驗SEL活動。教育制度外的持份者，例如非政府組織與青年工作者等，亦難以參與培養學生的抗逆力。

## 總結及未來路向

社會需要循序漸進的改變。在探討未來路向時，我們建議，先與持份者在社交及情緒教育的重要性方面達成共識，再按三個成功因素，設計改變的步伐，例如探討香港需要「由上而下」（如芬蘭、英國和新加坡）還是「由下而上」（如台灣）的改變。在報告的總結部分，我們也為各持份者列出了具體的建議，以供參考。

最後，本報告建議未來有關青年社交及情緒抗逆力的研究，應該着眼於如何向各持份者，尤其是青年首要接觸的家長及老師，推廣社交及情緒抗逆力的重要性，及提升他們教育青年的能力。

# Executive Summary

## A call for action on a comprehensive set of policies to nurture youth's social and emotional resilience

In Oct 2018, the OECD released “Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility” (OECD Report), with data showing that 15-year-old students in Hong Kong ranked third in the world in terms of academic resilience based on PISA results, but came in the bottom 5 in terms of social and emotional resilience. This is notwithstanding OECD’s finding that, in most countries and economies, social and emotional resilience tends to be positively related to academic resilience, and the two can be mutually reinforcing dimensions of a successful school experience. So, why is Hong Kong an anomaly, and what can be done to improve Hong Kong students’ social and emotional resilience? We took a 3-step approach to resolving the problems for the youth in Hong Kong.

### Step 1: Have an in-depth understanding of resilience

In response to the incomplete public understanding of resilience, this paper explains its theoretical underpinnings. It is believed that resilience is a dynamic process which involves the interaction between the risk factors (e.g. trauma, stressful life events) and protective factors (e.g. love from family, peer support), and occurs in one’s inner thoughts, family, school and community. When protective factors outweigh the risk factors, it produces adaptive outcomes despite adversities in life, which is in other words, a higher level of resilience.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) – a learning process or educational approach which aims at promoting positive developmental outcomes and addressing risk through enhancing one’s social and emotional competencies – has a strong correlation with resilience. Many social competencies to be cultivated in the SEL framework overlap with individual protective factors in resilience literature. However, SEL enriches the resilience framework by including emotional competencies, in addition to social competencies. The understanding of self and emotions, and the expression and management of emotions, are included in the SEL framework. Thus, it makes sense to look at SEL as a means of providing some directional suggestions to improve students’ social and emotional resilience.

## Step 2: Summarise the success factors from the overseas SEL policies and examples

In line with the international findings presented by the OECD, this paper is also comparative in its analysis. It draws reference in countries and regions renowned for their SEL policies and SEL-favourable school environment. Drawing from international experience, there are three key “success factors” for SEL:

- **Success Factor 1:** Social and emotional competencies are included as overarching education policy goals;
- **Success Factor 2:** Policy requirements for social and emotional competencies to be taught as a subject (the standalone approach), and/or for measures conducive to relationship-building and a positive school climate (the whole-school approach); and
- **Success Factor 3:** Room for SEL programmes and experimentation by other stakeholders outside the education system

One should note that the selected countries/regions that did well in SEL do not necessarily fulfil all of the three factors above. Instead, stakeholders including the governments, academia, NGOs, schools and parents have worked together to establish their own ecosystem (for example, with success factors 1 and 3) for the development of SEL.

### Step 3: Analyse the current policies and school support in Hong Kong

The analysis applies the three success factors to Hong Kong’s education system. Coupled with the findings from the expert interviews, we have made some observations and summarised them in the table below:

Success Factors	Hong Kong
1) Do education policy documents include social and emotional competencies as overarching learning goals?	Limited. There is minimal mention of social and emotional competencies.
2) (i) Are social and emotional competencies taught as an independent subject, or part of it?  (ii) Are there other compulsory measures conducive to a school climate for teacher-student and peer relationship building?	(i) Yes - but as part of a very broad curriculum.  (ii) No - disciplinary practices run counter to the whole-school approach to relationship-building.
3) Is there room for SEL programmes and experimentation by other stakeholders outside of the education system?	Limited. Some schools introduced the EDB Understanding Adolescent Project , or participated in SEL and related programmes (such as positive psychology and mindfulness courses).

To summarise, Hong Kong’s education policies do not include social and emotional competencies as learning goals. A lack of taxonomy might have contributed to a poor understanding of SEL, giving rise to challenges in implementing or scaling successful SEL programmes. These challenges exist despite an increase in recent years in activities targeted at improving students’ wellbeing in Hong Kong. In terms of educational practices among schools in Hong Kong, social and emotional competencies are not taught as an independent or a substantial part of a subject. Indeed, prevailing practices, based on tradition and focused on disciplinary methods, contradict the spirit and substance of SEL (essentially, relationship-building). Finally, there is little room for SEL programmes and experimentation due to a lack of class time. Stakeholders outside the education system (e.g. NGOs, youth workers) could hardly get involved in nurturing students’ resilience on account of the tight teaching schedules in schools.

## Conclusion and the Way Forward

Change is a gradual process. In strategising the way forward, this paper suggests having a dialogue first taken place among stakeholders to gain a consensus of the importance of social and emotional education, and on the way forward, such as whether the change should be effected from the top-down (as in Finland, the United Kingdom and Singapore) or from the bottom-up (as in Taiwan) based on the three success factors. Some concrete action items are also suggested in the conclusion chapter.

Lastly, this paper suggests that any future research aimed at promoting youth's social and emotional resilience may (and should) be in the direction of advocacy and capacity-building for these stakeholders, especially for parents and teachers, as they are the two primary agents who engage with youth directly.

# Introduction

## Background

Students' mental wellbeing has been in the spotlight of the society in recent years. Three studies are cited below to introduce the background of this paper –

1. The majority of students in Hong Kong are experiencing depression: A study revealed that 62.1% of Form 1 to Form 6 respondents, show slight to severe symptoms of depression<sup>1</sup>.



F.1- F.6 respondents  
SLIGHTLY DEPRESSED

**62.1%**

2. The looming risk of self-harm among students: What is even worse, students with depression symptoms might have the risk of self-harm. From 2013 to 2017, there were 37 cases of student suicide with sufferers aged 10 to 19<sup>2</sup>. Discussions arose on whether the education that our youth receive is inadequate to build resilience, a quality that navigates one to overcome challenges and struggles in life.

From 2013 to 2017

**37**  cases  
**SUICIDE** aged 10-19

3. Students ranked low in social and emotional resilience internationally: As the suicide rate spikes in 2017<sup>3</sup>, there is an encouraging increase of efforts in promoting the mental wellbeing of students<sup>4</sup>. However, Hong Kong still ends up to be an international outlier in terms of students' level of social and emotional resilience as stated by the 2018 OECD Report<sup>5</sup>.

**42<sup>nd</sup>**  / **49<sup>th</sup>**

Students **ranked low** in social and emotional resilience internationally

*Key findings of the OECD Report*

The data pertaining to the academic resilience and social and emotional resilience of Hong Kong students showed that disadvantaged students<sup>6</sup> performed well in academic resilience but were weak in social and emotional resilience as compared to students in other countries. Below is a snapshot of our students in terms of their academic resilience and social and emotional resilience.

Students who are academically resilient (Out of 70)		Students who are socially and emotionally resilient (Out of 49)	
Ranking	Country/Region	Ranking	Country/Region
1	Vietnam	49	Columbia
2	Macau	48	Dominican Republic
3	Hong Kong	47	Brazil
4	Singapore	46	Costa Rica
5	Japan	42	Hong Kong

The Report notes that in most other OECD countries and regions, academic resilience and social and emotional resilience are mutually reinforcing and positively correlated. However, as shown in the two tables above, the situation in Hong Kong is the other way round. We ranked high in academic resilience but not in social and emotional resilience, which makes us an outlier to the international trend.

In light of the background above, this paper looks into “resilience” from a broader perspective. What is the meaning of “resilience”? What kind of education is provided to students (including the disadvantaged) in Hong Kong? From an education policy perspective, how can we improve the social and emotional education received by every student to enhance their level of resilience?

## Research Goals

This paper has both theoretical and application elements. Through this paper, we aim to –

### Theoretical-wise

#### 1) Empower stakeholders in the youth work sector with a holistic understanding of resilience

Resilience has been frequently discussed in the youth work sector over the years, as it relates to a wide range of youth topics, including youth's mental wellbeing, suicide, bullying, academic stress, work skills and so on. A low resilience level is often suggested as one of the root causes of youth's incompetence in dealing with challenges in life. However, the meaning of "resilience" varies in the above contexts, and the discussion could become more nuanced once we define the term clearly. There have also been more discussions of "wellbeing" which somewhat overlaps with "resilience", if understood properly. Therefore, this paper will propose different dimensions of resilience, with the aim of facilitating a more comprehensive discussion about the related topics.

#### 2) Shift the discussion of youth resilience to a wider context of surrounding factors

In Hong Kong, the discussions of youth resilience have always been linked with the exam-oriented education system. One might therefore suggest reforming the curriculum to reduce the burden to young people. Rather than undermining these claims, this paper extends the scope of suggestions beyond curriculum reform<sup>7</sup>, to the family as well as the social environments surrounding young people. The discussion of youth resilience could become more meaningful when various environmental factors are taken into account.

### Application-wise

#### 3) Identify available educational policies and approaches for improving youth resilience in Hong Kong

Internationally and especially in Western literature, SEL has gained recognition as an impactful way to build resilience, improve wellbeing and education quality, and even employment outcomes, but not yet in Hong Kong. As there is no policy requirement for schools in Hong Kong to nurture students' social and emotional resilience, the paper first looks into examples of SEL implementation in different countries/regions, which are far more developed and comprehensive, including the US, the UK, Finland, Singapore and Taiwan, and goes on to stocktake existing policies and programmes in Hong Kong that embrace SEL in spirit. This paper then provides some general directions for improving the social and emotional education in Hong Kong, with a view of strengthening young people's resilience.

## Methodology

The study was conducted from 2019 to 2020. It is a qualitative study that involves desktop research and expert interviews.

The *Key Definitions and Concepts* chapter covers the theoretical underpinnings of resilience and the two related educational approaches, including SEL and positive psychology, then illustrates how they overlap with or differ from each other.

The *Literature Review on Social and Emotional Learning* chapter looks into the SEL theory and identifies the few prerequisites for SEL to be successfully implemented. The prerequisites then serve as the analytical ground for the overseas examples featured in the chapter of *International Policies and Success Factors*. This chapter then presents the success factors for SEL implementation.

Based on the success factors identified in the previous chapter, we have conducted a total of 11 expert interviews (details in Appendix) – with SEL practitioners, scholars, school principals and education innovators, to take a closer look at the situation in Hong Kong. The *Policies and School Support for Social and Emotional Education in Hong Kong* chapter then identifies the skills and knowledge gap of the stakeholders and provides some general directions to improve youth resilience in Hong Kong.

<sup>1</sup> Polytechnic University nursing school, Christian Family Service Centre (2015). 中學生焦慮及抑鬱情緒與個人、家庭及學校之相關因素。(The individual, family and school related factors of emotional anxiety and depressed emotions for secondary students). [online] Available at: <https://www.cfsc.org.hk/cmsimg/doc/20150325%20YM%20Press%20Con%20Press%20Release%20-%20Alt%20Text.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Coroner's Court (2018). Coroners' Report 2017 p.79; The Coroner's Court (2017). Coroners' Report 2016 p.45; The Coroner's Court (2016). Coroners' Report 2015 p.45; The Coroner's Court (2015). Coroners' Report 2014 p.49; The Coroner's Court (2014). Coroners' Report 2013 p.41.

<sup>3</sup> HKJC Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, The University of Hong Kong (2019). Suicide Rates by Age Group in Hong Kong 1981–2018. [online] Available at: <https://csrp.hku.hk/statistics/> [Accessed 19 Feb 2020]

<sup>4</sup> Details to be discussed in the Analysis of the Existing Policies and School Support for Social and Emotional Competencies in Hong Kong chapter.

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2018). Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility. [online] Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/equity-in-education-9789264073234-en.htm> [Accessed 26 Sep. 2019].

<sup>6</sup> The OECD report classifies socio-economically disadvantaged students as those “whose value on the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status is among the bottom 25% of students within their country or economy.”

<sup>7</sup> This is also in light of the Government's consultation on curriculum reform, which ended in Oct 2019.

# Key Definitions and Concepts

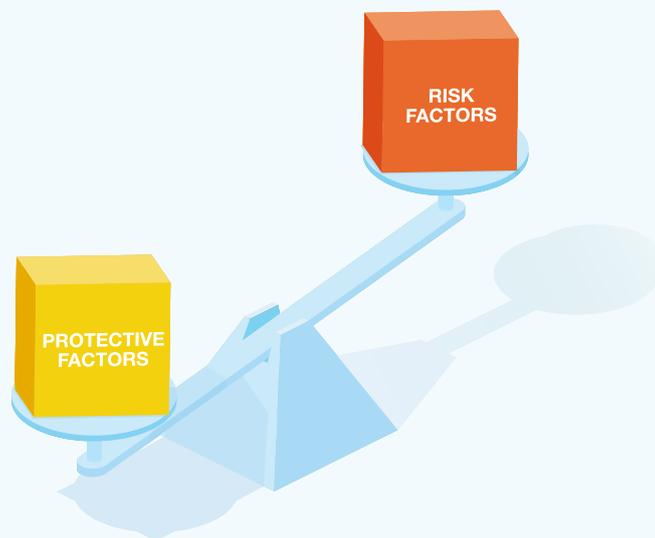
The purpose of this chapter is to provide a taxonomy of resilience and its related concepts, SEL and positive psychology (including growth mindset).

## Resilience as a Process

**Two definitions of resilience can be found in literature:**

- (1) resilience as a personal trait; and
- (2) resilience as a process.

Some researchers understand resilience as a personal trait and define resilience as “the human ability or capacity to bounce back from, overcome, survive, or successfully adapt to a variety of adverse conditions, or major or multiple life stresses.”



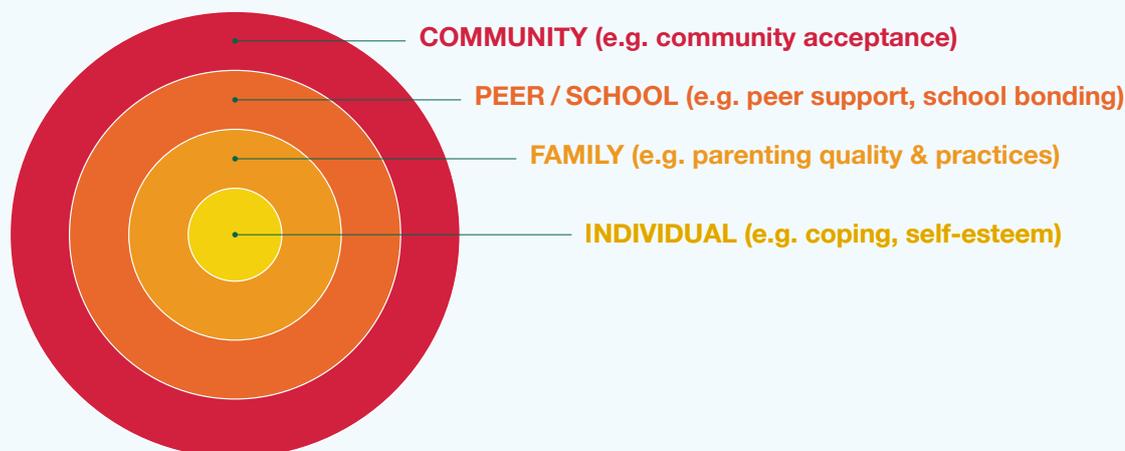
A more expanded framework sees resilience as a dynamic process which involves the interaction between a range of risk factors (e.g. adversity, trauma, threats, stressful life events ) and protective factors (e.g. love from family, peer support, good role models). As illustrated in the diagram, protective factors can outweigh risk factors to produce positive outcomes despite adversities in life. The outcome of the interaction between the two is usually described as adaptive or maladaptive outcomes.

In general, there has been a trend that deviates from defining resilience as a trait but to regard it as a dynamic process. The process approach prompts us to identify relevant factors and understand how they interact and work together to promote adaptive outcomes despite adversity. Two main questions are concerned: (1) What are the individual characteristics amounting to risk or protective factors? (2) How are these individual characteristics influenced by environmental factors in the family, school and community? Instead of seeing resilience as a broad and vague concept, the process approach puts it into specific contexts. This encourages more precise and in-depth analyses of the relevant external factors and provides more insight as to interventions. Interventions could be aimed at developing an individual’s internal resources, and equally importantly, changing the environment.

Ismael-Lennon’s study illustrates a comprehensive, systemic approach to understanding and promoting resilience<sup>8</sup>. Twelve Hispanic-American inner-city at-risk male students were interviewed about factors leading to academic resilience. The themes that emerged were individual traits, home environment, school and community characteristics. Importantly, the study found that it was the interaction between all of these factors that promoted academic resilience; any single factor in isolation would be insufficient. In the case of an individual, it was the combination of cognitive abilities, a parent who emphasises education and a strong connection to the school community through sports.

## Individual and Environmental Factors of Resilience

Resilience is centred on the individual, and is reinforced at home, in school and in the community.



This table gives examples of protective factors related to individual, family, school and community.

<b>Individual factors</b> ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-solving and coping skills</li> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> <li>• Internal locus of control, autonomy and independence</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Sense of purpose and meaning for life (or the ability to attribute meaning to life's events)</li> <li>• Sense of humour</li> </ul>	
<b>Environmental factors</b>	<b>Family-related</b> ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support, trust and love from the family</li> <li>• Parenting practices, especially healthy communication patterns</li> <li>• Socioeconomic status of the family</li> <li>• Having at least one parent who sets expectations on the child, and who can act as a source of support and mentorship</li> </ul>
	<b>School-related</b> ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement and sense of belonging to the school</li> <li>• Network of friends and peer support</li> <li>• Good role models</li> <li>• Having at least one significant adult who sets expectations on the child, and who can act as a source of support and mentorship</li> </ul>
	<b>Community-related</b> ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of social networks</li> <li>• Accepting, non-punitive social structures</li> <li>• Having at least one significant adult who sets expectations on the child, and who can act as a source of support and mentorship</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Ismael-Lennon, A. (2010). An Examination of Academic Resilience Among High-Achieving Hispanic-American Male Inner City Adolescents. [online] Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8953/475b96a897e5097b02311abad1c4bfbf9e23.pdf> [Accessed 26 Sep. 2019].

### **Two features of resilience should be noted above.**

First, resilience is context-specific. Researchers commonly describe resilience in three domains: academic, social and emotional. A resilient individual in one domain may not show resilience in another.<sup>9,10</sup> A child who does well in school (high academic resilience) may display behavioural problems (low social and/or emotional resilience). It is more useful to specify domains of resilience, such as academic resilience, social resilience, and emotional resilience, to yield detailed insights into development and interventions. Parenting qualities such as cognitive stimulating and sensitive parenting behaviours were found to be related to academic resilience. School bonding and peer support were associated with both academic and social resilience. Indicators of adaptive/maladaptive outcomes include criminal behaviours (social resilience), mental health outcomes (emotional resilience), and academic performance (academic resilience)<sup>11</sup>.

Second, resilience is influenced by a range of environmental and socio-cultural factors. While many protective factors reported in Asian societies are similar to those reported in Western countries, there can also be cultural nuances. For instance, a study showed that the Korean concept of resilience focused more on individual personal strength, whereas Westerners relied more on external resources and social support<sup>12</sup>.

To shed light on these two features, a study which examined how school climate fosters academic resilience was conducted.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-six 11<sup>th</sup>-grade high school students of colour in a culturally diverse high school in California, who faced higher barriers to complete high school, were interviewed about their school experiences. Findings suggested that the school climate must establish high expectations for all students (aspiration-building), focus on the strength of each student (strength-based), and provide students with counsellors who are proactive in providing all students with college information (not just the highest achieving or disruptive ones) and counselling (equitable and supportive). For students coming from families without higher education experience, this school climate mitigates the risk of an early drop-out, by acting as a source of inspiration and support for students to enter higher education.

Two educational approaches including SEL and positive psychology stand out in nurturing youth's resilience. Both approaches take a range of environmental and socio-cultural factors into account and are conducive to resilience-building. We will examine the two approaches together with the concept of resilience.

## **Resilience within the Social and Emotional Learning Framework**

SEL is defined as:

“The process through which children enhance their capacity to recognise and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish pro-social goals and solve problems, and use a variety of interpersonal skills to effectively and ethically handle developmentally relevant tasks.<sup>14</sup>”

SEL programmes aim to promote positive developmental outcomes through the enhancement of competencies. SEL proponents believe that there is a need to cultivate social and emotional competencies in children and youth in general. Comprehensive whole-school programmes, which are, programmes focusing on the environment and not on a specific target group, have proved to be more effective, with long term changes to students' attitudes across a wide range of social, emotional and behavioural issues.

The competencies within the SEL framework are diverse and all-encompassing. SEL proponents have identified self-awareness, control of impulsivity, cooperation, caring about oneself and others, appropriate expression of emotions, management of emotions, empathy and motivation of oneself and others, as competencies that enable children and youth to form healthy relationships, solve problems and meet daily life challenges. Weare<sup>15</sup> proposed three basic competency groups in SEL: (1) self-understanding; (2) understanding, expressing and managing our emotions (which included resilience and determination); and (3) understanding and making relationships. The framework established by CASEL, a renowned SEL advocacy organisation in US, also laid out the social and emotional competencies expected of students from SEL. It comprises: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making<sup>16</sup>.

Certain mindsets, habits and attitudes reinforce these competencies.<sup>17,18</sup> It was observed that successful SEL programmes rarely represented and taught social and emotional competencies as skills, which may suggest fixed standards or behaviours; rather, they focused more on encouraging reflection and fostering relationships, and creating an environment that was conducive to these mindsets, habits and attitudes.

Resilience and SEL intersect in the following ways: (1) their approach in addressing risks in children's and young people's lives, which is through enhancing competencies for all, not only those at risk; (2) the individual competencies to be cultivated, understood as individual protective factors in resilience research; and (3) their emphasis on environmental factors, and how these factors interact with individual qualities to promote healthy personal growth and development.<sup>19</sup>

That said, SEL does enrich the resilience framework, since it equally emphasises emotional competencies and social competencies. Competencies such as the accurate interpretation of social cues, respect for others, altruism, cooperation or social participation, etc., are included in the SEL framework, but not in the resilience framework.

<sup>9</sup> Freitas and Downey (1998). Resilience: A Dynamic Perspective.

[online] Available at: [http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/~afreitas-/publications/freitas\\_downey1998.pdf](http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/~afreitas-/publications/freitas_downey1998.pdf) [Accessed 26 Sep. 2019].

<sup>10</sup> Luthar, S., Doernberger, C. and Zigler, E. (1993). Resilience is not a unidimensional construct: Insights from a prospective study of inner-city adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, 5(4), pp.703–717.

<sup>11</sup> Tollit et al. (2015). Epidemiological evidence relating to resilience and young people: A literature review. 10.13140/RG.2.1.1302.2801.

<sup>12</sup> Kim, H., & Park, W. (2014). The Differences of Resilience between Korean and Westerner: Concept Analysis. *International Journal of Bio-Science And Bio-Technology*, 6(4), 99–112. doi: 10.14257/ijbsbt.2014.6.4.10

<sup>13</sup> Franklin (2017). Exploring Organizational Factors That Influence Resilience and Persistence Among High School Students Of Color. [online] Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/bb99/a24e5346e425685ab630feb6f679237a6226.pdf> [Accessed 26 Sep. 2019].

<sup>14</sup> Elias, M., Bruene-Butler, L., Blum, L., & Schuyler, T. (2000). Voices from the field: Identifying and overcoming roadblocks to carrying out programs in social and emotional learning/ emotional intelligence. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 11(2), 253–272.

<sup>15</sup> Weare, K. (2003). What are we aiming at? what competences are we trying to develop? in what key ways can schools help develop these competences?. In *Developing the emotionally literate school* (pp. 17–51). London: SAGE Publications Ltd doi: 10.4135/9781446215081.n2

<sup>16</sup> CASEL. (n.d.). Core SEL Competencies.

[online] Available at: <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>

<sup>17</sup> Tough, P. (2016). Helping children succeed. p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Farrington. (2012). Teaching Adolescents To Become Learners.

[online] Available at: <https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Teaching-Adolescents-to-Become-Learners.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Cefai, C. (2004). Pupil resilience in the classroom. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 9(3), pp.149–170.

## Resilience and Positive Psychology

Resilience research arose, in part, out of the positive psychology movement, which studied the conditions in which certain people prevailed over stress factors despite severe hardship. Drawn from the work on learned helplessness, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi developed the theory of learned optimism and described the three pillars of positive psychology as: (1) developing positive emotions; (2) building positive traits (which included resilience and perseverance); and (3) fostering positive institutions (such as creating a school environment that encourages growth and development)<sup>20</sup>. Resilience and positive psychology therefore share certain elements, especially in the context of academic resilience.

In 2010s, Seligman expanded the three pillars of positive psychology into the PERMA model, namely – positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment<sup>21</sup>. Integral to positive psychology is the growth mindset. In simple terms:

Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts) because they worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning.<sup>22</sup>

Growth mindset could be applied to different contexts. For example, it explains academic performance variations, based on differences in goals, motivations and attributions. Hong, Chiu, Dweck and Wan's study found that, when individuals believe that intelligence is fixed, they tend to seek validation and avoid negative feedback<sup>23</sup>. They become more concerned with demonstrating ability and are less inclined to exert effort (for they see effort as indicating low ability). In contrast, when individuals believe that intelligence is malleable, they tend to orient towards learning goals (to gain knowledge, skills and competence) and are more willing to work hard. They attribute success/failure to effort and will take remedial action and look for ways to improve. Intervention programmes are also held in the context of social and emotional resilience, not only in schools but also in armies. A well-known illustration would be the US Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme designed for soldiers to build up their resilience by applying positive psychology via three components: a psychological fitness test, optional self-improvement courses, and “master resilience training” for drill sergeants<sup>24</sup>.

Thus, the shaping of a student's mindset or belief is an important direction for intervention in positive psychology, and could lead to successful nurturing of resilience.

## Developments of SEL and Positive Psychology in Hong Kong

SEL and positive psychology happen to be the buzzwords in Hong Kong when it comes to promoting students' wellbeing and implementing social and emotional/character education. The two theories position themselves for different educational goals. SEL is a theory developed based on education settings, which focuses on nurturing students' awareness and management of a wide variety of emotions, like pride, stress, disappointment, so that one can become more self-aware and self-controlled regardless of the obstacles one faces in life and the kind of emotions (whether positive or negative) one has. It helps one to enhance positively valenced emotions, and control negatively valenced and disruptive ones<sup>25</sup>.

Positive psychology is a psychological theory that emphasises on the learned optimism, which shifts one's perspective to maximise the possibility to maintain a "flourishing life" (in other words, a thriving life). Therefore, positive education, which stems from the science of positive psychology, might pose a risk for practitioners to promote positive emotions for learned optimism, such as joy, gratitude, serenity, rather than educate about the whole basket of emotions humans normally feel. This has led to certain criticisms of the positive psychology school of thought, in that having/expressing negative emotions could be beneficial to interpersonal relationships, and even to life satisfaction generally<sup>26</sup>.

**In the context of Hong Kong's social and emotional education, both SEL or positive psychology are at their pilot stages (details will be covered in later chapters), and relatively, SEL as an educational theory receives less attention. Thus, in the following chapters, we will look into SEL literatures, policies and practices around the world, with the aim of supplementing the existing social and emotional education in Hong Kong. Indeed, there is a strong theoretical foundation that SEL and positive psychology could be used collaboratively to promote resilience in students<sup>27</sup>; there are also practices that blend SEL and positive psychology in schools from other countries<sup>28</sup>.**

<sup>20</sup>Seligman, Martin & Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (2000). Positive Psychology: An Introduction. *The American psychologist*. 55. 5–14. 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5.

<sup>21</sup>Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish: A New Theory of Positive Psychology*. The University of Pennsylvania. [online] Available at: <https://www.authenticchappiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletters/flourishnewsletters/newtheory>

<sup>22</sup>Dweck, C. (2016). What having a "Growth Mindset" Actually Means. *Harvard Business Review*. [online] Available at: [hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means](http://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means)

<sup>23</sup>Hong, Y., Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C., Lin, D. M. –, & Wan, W. (1999). Implicit theories, attributions, and coping: A meaning system approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(3), 588–599. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.eproxy.lib.hku.hk/10.1037/0022-3514.77.3.588>

<sup>24</sup>Seligman, M. (2011). *Building Resilience*. *Harvard Business Review*. [online] Available at: <https://hbr.org/2011/04/building-resilience>

<sup>25</sup>Kristjánsson, K. (2018). Educating Emotions. In *Virtuous Emotions* (p. Virtuous Emotions, Chapter 9). Oxford University Press.

<sup>26</sup>Graham, S., Huang, J., Clark, M. and Helgeson, V. (2008). The Positives of Negative Emotions: Willingness to Express Negative Emotions Promotes Relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(3), pp.394–406.

<sup>27</sup>Dweck, C. S. (2017). From needs to goals and representations: Foundations for a unified theory of motivation, personality, and development. *Psychological review*, 124(6), 689.

<sup>28</sup>Mindsetworks. (n.d). *Growing Early Mindsets*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/programs/gem>

## Chapter Key Takeaways

### Resilience

1. Resilience is the interaction and balancing process between risk and protective factors.
2. Risk and protective factors related to the individual, family, school and community interact with one another and result in adaptive or maladaptive outcomes. Protective factors can outweigh risk factors to produce positive outcomes despite adversities in life.
3. Resilience and resilience outcomes are context-specific, and are commonly understood in the academic, social and emotional contexts.

### Social and Emotional Learning

4. SEL is aimed at promoting positive developmental outcomes and addressing risks through enhancing social and emotional competencies in children and young people.
5. The approach of SEL is grounded in the understanding of the influence of external factors on the individual, and is focused on creating family, school, and social environments to promote positive outcomes.

### Similarities and Differences between Resilience and Social and Emotional Learning

6. Many social competencies to be cultivated in the SEL framework overlap with individual protective factors in resilience literature.
7. However, SEL enriches the resilience framework by including emotional competencies, in addition to social competencies. The understanding of self and emotions, and the expression and management of emotions, are included in the SEL framework.

### Using Positive Psychology and Growth Mindset to Build Resilience

8. Positive psychology is built on the three pillars of: (1) developing positive emotions; (2) building positive traits; and (3) fostering positive environments. The latter two elements overlap with resilience.
9. A growth mindset plays an important role in positive psychology, and promotes resilience in different aspects.
10. The emphasis on learned optimism in positive psychology poses a risk for practitioners to promote positive emotions rather than educate about the whole basket of emotions humans normally feel.



When protective factors outweigh the risk factors, it produces adaptive outcomes despite adversities in life, which is in other words, a higher level of resilience.

# Literature Review on Social and Emotional Learning

## 1) Equity and Mobility as a Policy Reason for SEL



In the context of improving education equity and social mobility for disadvantaged students, the OECD published a study on the social, emotional and academic resilience of disadvantaged 15-year-old students, based on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. It was found that students who are socially and emotionally resilient also tend to do better in academic resilience. This makes a case for long-term and better SEL policies and, generally, for cultivating a positive learning environment for all.

The OECD's finding of academic development as a result of social and emotional wellbeing dovetails with intensifying research interest in non-cognitive qualities (or soft skills). Qualities like perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control and optimism have been found to play a role in improving outcomes for low-income children. A study in the UK based on longitudinal data from the National Child Development Study found that an overall measure of non-cognitive qualities is important to a host of later outcomes in life, including educational attainment, employment status, wages, delinquent behaviour (e.g. truancy, teenage pregnancy, criminal activities) and health.<sup>29</sup> Social skills at age 7 were significantly correlated with both employment status and hourly wages at age 42, and exerted a negative and significant influence on crime and depression. Data indicated that social skills affected later outcomes of children from low socio-economic status (SES) families more significantly than it did for children from high SES families. Social skills also mattered more to employment outcomes than cognitive skills for children from low SES families.

In other countries like the US and New Zealand, there are also long-term psychological studies showing that children who exhibit certain non-cognitive capacities (including self-control and conscientiousness) are more likely to experience a variety of improved outcomes in adulthood. A longitudinal study tracking 1,000 children in Dunedin starting from the early 1970s found that children with strong non-cognitive capacities go on to complete more years of education and experience better health. They are also less likely to display problem behaviours<sup>30</sup>.

Although this paper advocates SEL for every student in Hong Kong, there are good policy reasons for promoting SEL to improve the non-cognitive qualities of children from low SES backgrounds. These children can benefit more from having social and emotional competencies, and policies that invest in these non-cognitive qualities may reduce inequality.

## 2) Using Early Childhood Intervention for SEL

Another theme that emerged from the OECD Report was the importance of early childhood intervention in the context of SEL. The OECD suggested countries/ regions to promote greater access to early childhood education and care for children to acquire essential social and emotional skills.



Neurobiological research, mostly from Western literature, demonstrates the primacy of the environment and the importance of starting early in supporting children to develop non-cognitive qualities. Children's non-cognitive qualities are primarily a reflection of their home and school environments. Evidence shows that early childhood (the years before a child's 6th birthday and especially before his/her 3rd) is critical.<sup>31</sup> Children's brains in those early years are most malleable, and the effect of the environment is amplified during the early years. This is because harsh or unstable environments can create biological changes in the growing brains and bodies of infants and children. These changes impair the development of an important set of mental capacities that help children regulate their thoughts and feelings, and that impairment makes it difficult later on for them to process information and manage emotions in ways that allow them to succeed at schools.

A US study discussed the reasons for the success of the Perry Preschool Program, a flagship early childhood intervention that targeted disadvantaged, low IQ African-American children aged 3-4. Although Perry did not produce long-run gains in IQ, it did create persistent improvements in personality skills and substantially improved externalising behaviours (aggressive, antisocial, and rule-breaking behaviours), and in turn, improved labour market outcomes and health behaviours, and reduced criminal activities<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Carneiro, P., Crawford, C., & Goodman, A. (2007). The impact of early cognitive and non-cognitive skills on later outcomes.

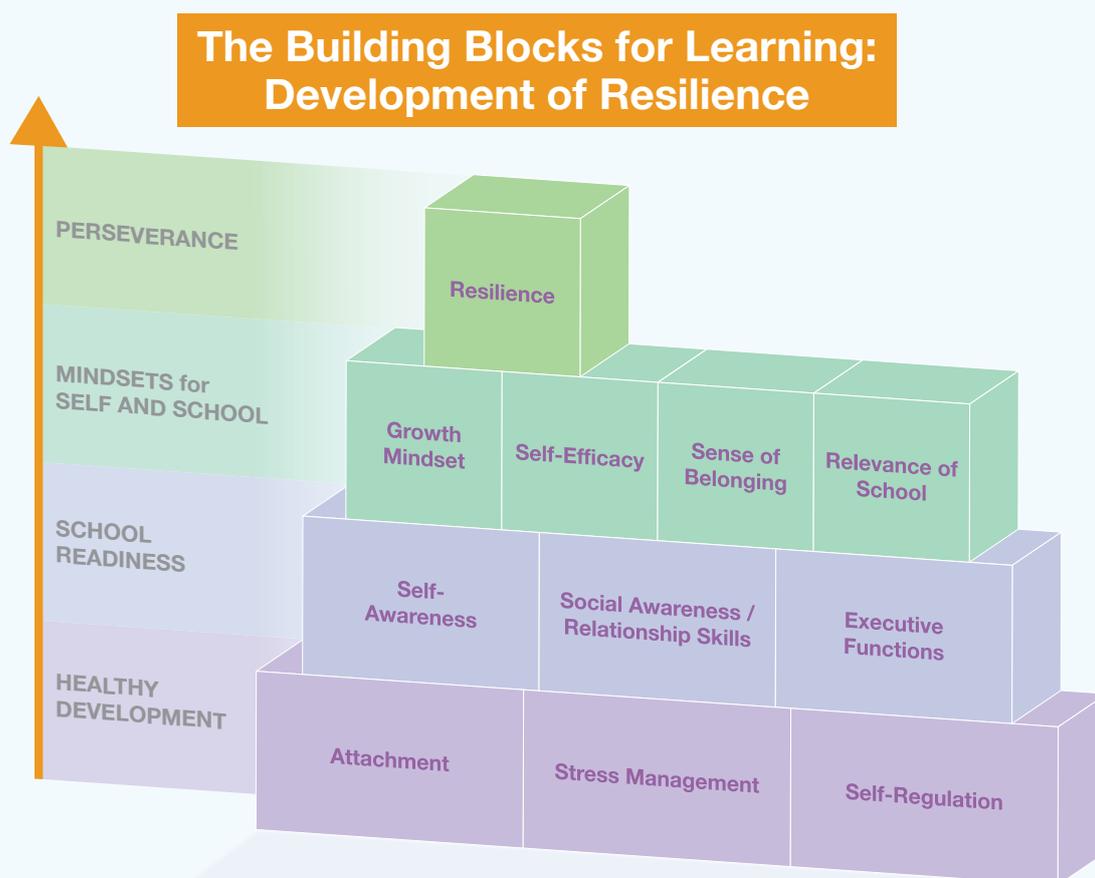
<sup>30</sup> Silva, P. (1990). The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study: a 15 year longitudinal study. *Paediatric and Perinatal Epidemiology*, 4(1), pp.76-107.

<sup>31</sup> Tough, P. (2016). Helping children succeed

<sup>32</sup> Heckman, J., Pinto, R. and Savelyev, P. (2013). Understanding the Mechanisms Through Which an Influential Early Childhood Program Boosted Adult Outcomes. *American Economic Review*, 103(6), pp.2052-2086.

### 3) Leveraging Early Childhood SEL to Develop Resilience

The Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development provides a useful theoretical framework for closing the achievement gap of disadvantaged children through improving their social and emotional qualities.<sup>33</sup> High-level non-cognitive skills like resilience, curiosity, and academic tenacity are very difficult for a child to obtain without first developing a foundation of executive functions, a capacity for self-awareness, and relationship skills. Those skills, in turn, stand atop an infrastructure of qualities built in the first years of life, qualities like secure attachment, the ability to manage stress, and self-regulation.



The Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development as illustrated in point 3 in this chapter. It showcases how one could leverage early childhood SEL to develop resilience for children.

### 4) Supporting Parents in Early Childhood SEL

Interventions targeted at parents can be a useful way of improving children’s social and emotional competencies. The University of West Indies, Jamaica, carried out an experiment over 3 decades starting in 1986<sup>34</sup>. The participating families were divided into 4 groups, and respectively received play-supporting home visits, nutrition supplement, both play-supporting home visits and the supplement, and nothing as control. After 2 years, it was found that children whose parents received play-supporting home visits displayed less aggressive behaviour and more self-control, and even fared better in IQ tests. As adults, they earn 25% more per year than other subjects.



## 5) Supporting Teachers in Early Childhood SEL

That said, for practical reasons, policymakers may find more effective leverage in school interventions targeted at kids aged 3-6 attending kindergartens. A good example is the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP), developed by a psychologist at New York University, Cybele Raver<sup>35</sup>. The programme aimed to enhance the self-regulatory abilities of children in low-income pre-K classrooms (4-year olds). Teachers in CSRP receive training on classroom management techniques to provide students with a calm, consistent classroom experience. Children who spent their pre-K year in a CSRP classroom had substantially higher attention skills, greater impulse control, and better performance on executive-function tasks than children in the control group. Children's improved self-regulatory capacity was evident both on the behavioural level - in their ability to sit quietly, follow directions, and maintain attention in the face of distractions - and on the cognitive level. These children had better vocabulary, letter-naming and math skills, even though teachers' training did not include any academic content.



### Chapter Key Takeaways

1. Studies found that students who are socially and emotionally resilient tend to achieve better outcomes in adult life. Children from low SES families benefit more than children from high SES families. Thus, long-term policy reasons for promoting SEL exist in terms of improving mobility and reducing inequality.
2. The OECD and neurobiological research from Western literature emphasised the importance of early childhood intervention in the context of SEL. The theoretical underpinning for SEL to start as early as possible is that children must have a foundation of qualities, e.g. self-awareness, self-regulation, secure attachment, the ability to manage stress, before they can go on to develop good relationships with others, including teachers and parents, who will play pivotal roles in their learning, and higher-level attributes conducive to cognitive development like curiosity and academic tenacity.
3. Parents and teachers must be supported as part and parcel of early childhood intervention in SEL. Support for parents and teachers have shown to be effective in improving young children's social and emotional, and cognitive skills.

<sup>33</sup>Turnaround for Children. (2017). *The Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development*.

<sup>34</sup>The New York Times. (2016). *To Help Kids Thrive, Coach Their Parents*.

[online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/opinion/sunday/to-help-kids-thrive-coach-their-parents.html>

<sup>35</sup>Watts, T. W., Gandhi, J., Ibrahim, D. A., Masucci, M. D., & Raver, C. C. (2018). The Chicago School Readiness Project: Examining the long-term impacts of an early childhood intervention. *PLoS one*, 13(7), e0200144. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0200144

# International Policies and Success Factors

This chapter compares and analyses the SEL-related 1) **basic education** policies\* and 2) practices around the world, as reference examples for Hong Kong to consider.

To build a resilience-friendly environment for youth, SEL should be implemented by various stakeholders, through multi-pronged methods. This chapter highlights examples from the US, the UK, Finland, Taiwan and Singapore, suggesting how stakeholders in these countries and regions have made SEL a primary goal for student/youth development. Based on these examples, we will summarise the success factors as the analytical ground for further analysis of the situation in Hong Kong.

## 1. The United States

The national education policy in the US – Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)<sup>36</sup> – was updated and enacted in 2015. Although the exact term social and emotional learning does not appear in ESSA, it operates in a way such that SEL may be incorporated into state curriculum and extra-curricular activities. The ESSA provides flexibility for states, local agencies, districts, and schools to conduct evidence-based interventions to improve school conditions for student learning, enhancement of peer interactions, provision of a well-rounded education, etc.<sup>37</sup> In 2017, USD 1.65 billion was granted to help states incorporate SEL into the curriculum<sup>38</sup> for projects like teacher training programmes, formulation of assessments, and development of pilot programmes.

While there is no national curriculum in the US, schools' curricula and learning standards are decided at the state level. Some states, including Illinois, have incorporated SEL into the curriculum and also as schools' standards and benchmarks. The standards outline the age-appropriate social and emotional qualities students are expected to achieve to guide schools' instruction, thereby making sure that social and emotional competencies are one of the key goals of student development<sup>39</sup>.

The non-profit sector in the US has been a strong advocate for SEL since the 1990s. CASEL, as mentioned in the previous chapters, provided a credible definition of SEL that is well-recognised among governments, educators and youth workers around the world. The CASEL Framework<sup>40</sup>, which laid out the social and emotional competencies expected of students – has informed policy-making, pedagogies and practices design via conducting evidence-based academic research as well as testing with schools and communities over the past two decades.

The PATHS programme developed by Greenberg and Kusche in the 1990s, is a school-based curriculum designed for primary students. It is grounded in SEL as it aims to reduce the risk factors and increase the protective factors of resilience. It has proved to be beneficial for improving students' emotional knowledge and awareness, self-control and social problem-solving<sup>41</sup>. This curriculum is delivered in the form of standalone lessons with strict lesson plans and scripts. It has been applied worldwide in many countries, including the US, the UK, Australia and even Hong Kong.

\* “Basic education” refers to the compulsory education provided by the country/region. All of the countries/regions highlighted in this paper have basic education that cover primary education and lower- and upper-secondary education. Exceptions include Finland (with an additional year of pre-primary education) and Taiwan (without upper-secondary education).

## 2. The United Kingdom

The Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) implemented in the 2000s is a curriculum that aims to help students “acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills they need to manage their lives, now and in the future”<sup>42</sup>. Effective from September 2020, there will be a reform in the curricula, bringing Relationships Education to primary schools, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) to secondary schools and Health Education to both primary and secondary schools. The key changes in the reform are highlighted below:

- From non-statutory to statutory: PSHE is a non-statutory subject before the update, whereas the reformed RSE and Health Education will have a statutory standing and therefore be compulsory for primary and secondary students.
- From a broad-based curriculum to having relationships as the focus: Relationship skills have become a significant building block of student development, which is also one of the key social and emotional competencies according to the CASEL Framework.

Although the term social and emotional learning is not explicitly mentioned, the move of prioritising relationships is clearly indicated by the UK Government as one of the reasons for the reform. In particular, skills related to SEL including respect for others, fundamental characteristics of positive relationships and self-care are taught in this statutory curriculum in the format of programmes or lessons<sup>43</sup>. The reform also matches with the recommendation put forward by the Cabinet Office and Social Mobility and the Child Poverty Commission in 2015, which advocates for nurturing students’ social and emotional skills as early as possible<sup>44</sup>.

Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) has been a significant programme that exhibits SEL in the UK. SEAL is a programme that promotes social and emotional skills to underpin “effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and wellbeing of all who learn and work in schools”<sup>45</sup>. Differing from PATHS as illustrated above, SEAL is not a structured package with strict lesson plans and timetables<sup>46</sup>; in contrast, SEAL emphasises on the use of the whole-school approach, which generally denotes having a positive climate, pedagogies and practices that are conducive to teacher-student and peer relationship-building. It also includes the direct teaching of social and emotional skills in classes and continued professional development for the school staff<sup>47</sup>.

NGOs and academia in the UK have been active in advocating for good practices to support students’ wellbeing, which often overlap with common SEL exercises. In 2019, the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and the University College London partnered with the UK Government to carry out mental health trials in more than 370 schools, to discern practices that support students’ mental wellbeing through robust evidence-based research<sup>48</sup>. Trials include traditional SEL practices like mindfulness exercises, relaxation techniques and breathing exercises<sup>49</sup>.

### 3. Finland

Finland – the country that has long been renowned for its quality education system – is ranked as the top three countries with 15-year old students having the highest social and emotional resilience. Students in general have high life satisfaction and reports have shown that Finnish schools have the happiest kids in the world<sup>50</sup>.

The Finnish Government updated its national curriculum in 2016 and employed an integrated approach in its structuring. It aims to improve the interdependence among the curriculum, school culture, school assessment and methods. One of the emphases of the curriculum is to create a school culture that brings in “a learning community which takes care of the safety and wellbeing of each and every member of the community”. Seven core transversal competencies – including one that focuses on students’ self-management and relationships skills – were introduced as the core goals of the curriculum. They are always taught, studied and assessed as a part of various subjects<sup>51</sup>.

Schools play a key role in creating an SEL-favourable environment for students. There are a couple of distinct characteristics within the school environment that can help schools embrace SEL. First, pre-primary children develop learning-to-learn skills through play-based activities<sup>52</sup> including songs, rhyming poems, games, which are proved to be essential for supporting children's phonological and socio-emotional development<sup>53</sup>. Second, students receive continuous care from the same class teacher from Grade 1 to Grade 6 (in Hong Kong terms, P1-P6)<sup>54</sup>, who teaches them most of the subjects. As such, teachers get to know the students well which allows them to take better care of the students’ individual needs. The above practices are regarded as pedagogies and practices under the whole-school approach to instil SEL into the learning environment.

Each school in Finland has its team of non-teaching staff that monitors and takes care of students’ wellbeing, including a social worker, a school nurse, a doctor, a psychologist and three student counsellors. Such an environment encourages students to express their emotions and seek help from professionals when needed. Schools could also refer students to other professionals (e.g. psychiatrist and police) when they feel the student needs extra help/the situation requires escalation<sup>55, 56</sup>.

Education start-ups have brought significant influence towards the advocacy of SEL in Finland. Mightifier, an educational app developed based on SEL and positive psychology, is a peer-communication platform that allows students to provide feedback – based on 27 character strengths – towards each other after classroom activities<sup>57</sup>. It allows students to appreciate and focus on each other’s strengths, for the purpose of creating a positive and collaborative classroom environment. Till now, the app has been piloted in Finland, US states (Illinois and California) and Hong Kong. Moreover, it is expected to have a strong presence in Asia soon<sup>58, 59</sup>. As an educational start-up co-founded by Finland school leaders, teachers and students<sup>60</sup> and supported by different Finnish education accelerators<sup>61</sup>, it is a successful example of education innovation as well as cross-sector consensus on the importance of SEL.

## 4. Taiwan

Asian cities in general have greater academic stress and fared worse in students' wellbeing. Taiwan and Singapore, however, are two cities in the region that demonstrated gradual advancements in SEL. Below illustrates their SEL development in recent years, which might also have a higher reference value with respect to the situation in Hong Kong.

Although social and emotional skills are not part of the basic education curriculum goals, advancements were made in Taiwan's pre-primary education. In 2017, the kindergarten curriculum was updated and incorporated emotion management as one of the six overarching objectives in kindergarten education<sup>62, 63</sup>. This is in line with the principle that SEL should be implemented at an early stage. In Taiwan, kindergarten students learn how to (1) accept their own emotions, (2) face adversities positively, (3) develop emotional stability and freely express their emotions, and (4) care and understand others' emotions at the age of 2 -6. These skills are all relevant to the fundamental SEL concepts.

Other than the curriculum changes, three Acts were passed in 2014 to encourage education innovation and experiments<sup>64</sup>. In particular, experimental education which refers to the testing of education principles outside of the existing framework, is delivered based on specific educational concepts (e.g. Waldorf education, Montessori education, etc). Such an initiative is encouraged among schools and even universities<sup>65</sup>. As of 2018, 63 schools and 13,336 students received experimental education in Taiwan<sup>66</sup>. As these schools are usually less academic-oriented and have higher flexibilities in curriculum design, the allocation of human resources and the rigour of evaluation processes, these characteristics favour SEL experimentation and are more likely to provide evidence-based insight into ways to improve students' social and emotional skills after the experiment period.

Taiwan has also illustrated an interesting case in which parents have become the primary force in advocating for SEL. Since the 2000s, Happiness Village, an organisation formed by child and adolescent psychological experts, has started to develop free SEL teaching materials for middle and upper-primary students. With the teaching materials, the organisation applied a bottom-up approach that empowers parents to become volunteers and implement SEL alongside teachers in schools<sup>67</sup>. It aims to popularise SEL concepts in schools and eventually, in families in Taiwan. Till now, the organisation has trained up to 3,000 parent volunteers and has served more than 400,000 students. In terms of its scope, the movement covers schools in Taipei, Xinbei, Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Miaoli, and Changhua<sup>68</sup>.

## 5. Singapore

The Singapore Government has made social and emotional competencies an integral part of the curriculum since 2014. In a Framework that outlines the desired outcomes of formal education, social and emotional competencies are referred to as the main component that underpins the component of knowledge and skills. The competencies in the Singaporean Framework are developed based on international literature, e.g. CASEL, and comments from local education practitioners. The Singaporean Framework illustrates that SEL is well aligned with the goals of formal education in Singapore.

Followed by the curriculum, the Government has also set a multi-pronged implementation plan for schools, that emphasises the importance of building a whole-school environment (or in their words, a safe and caring school environment). The plan consists of four key approaches, including (1) prototyping – a design process that requires schools to design customised SEL programmes for their students, (2) training – entry and continued training on SEL for teachers, (3) curriculum – the incorporation of SEL into academic subjects (like English language) and co-curricular activities, and (4) evaluation – the development of frameworks and tools to identify the needs of schools and assess student outcomes in SEL<sup>69</sup>.

As shown above, the building of the whole-school environment emphasises the role of teachers and teacher-student relationships. To achieve this, teachers are encouraged to focus on teaching and the Singapore Government has taken a big step towards reducing teachers' administrative burden. Public schools in Singapore have executive and administrative positions (e.g. Vice Principal (Administration), Administration Manager, Operations Manager) to relieve the administrative burden on normal teaching staff. In response to local comments that teachers who would like to spend more time with students and build quality relationships with them but in reality, they are unable to do as they wish due to heavy workload, this may be an indirect measure that can supplement other policies in creating a more favourable environment for the implementation of SEL<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2015). Every Student Succeeds Act.

[online] Available at: <https://www.ed.gov/essa>

<sup>67</sup> Wallace Foundation. (2017). How the Every Student Succeeds Act can Support Social and Emotional Learning.

[online] Available at: <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Social-and-Emotional-Learning-Interventions-Under-ESSA-brief.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> Sridhar. (2017). Education Policy Supports Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

[online] Available at: <https://medium.com/inspired-ideas-prek-12/education-policy-supports-social-emotional-learning-aabb39efd125>

<sup>69</sup> Gordon, R. Ji, P. Mulhall, P. Shaw, B. Weissberg, R. (2011). Social and Emotional Learning for Illinois Students: Policy, Practice and Progress. How Illinois SEL standards came to be and what the state has learned through putting them into practice.

<sup>40</sup> CASEL. (n.d.). Core SEL Competencies.

[online] Available at: <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>

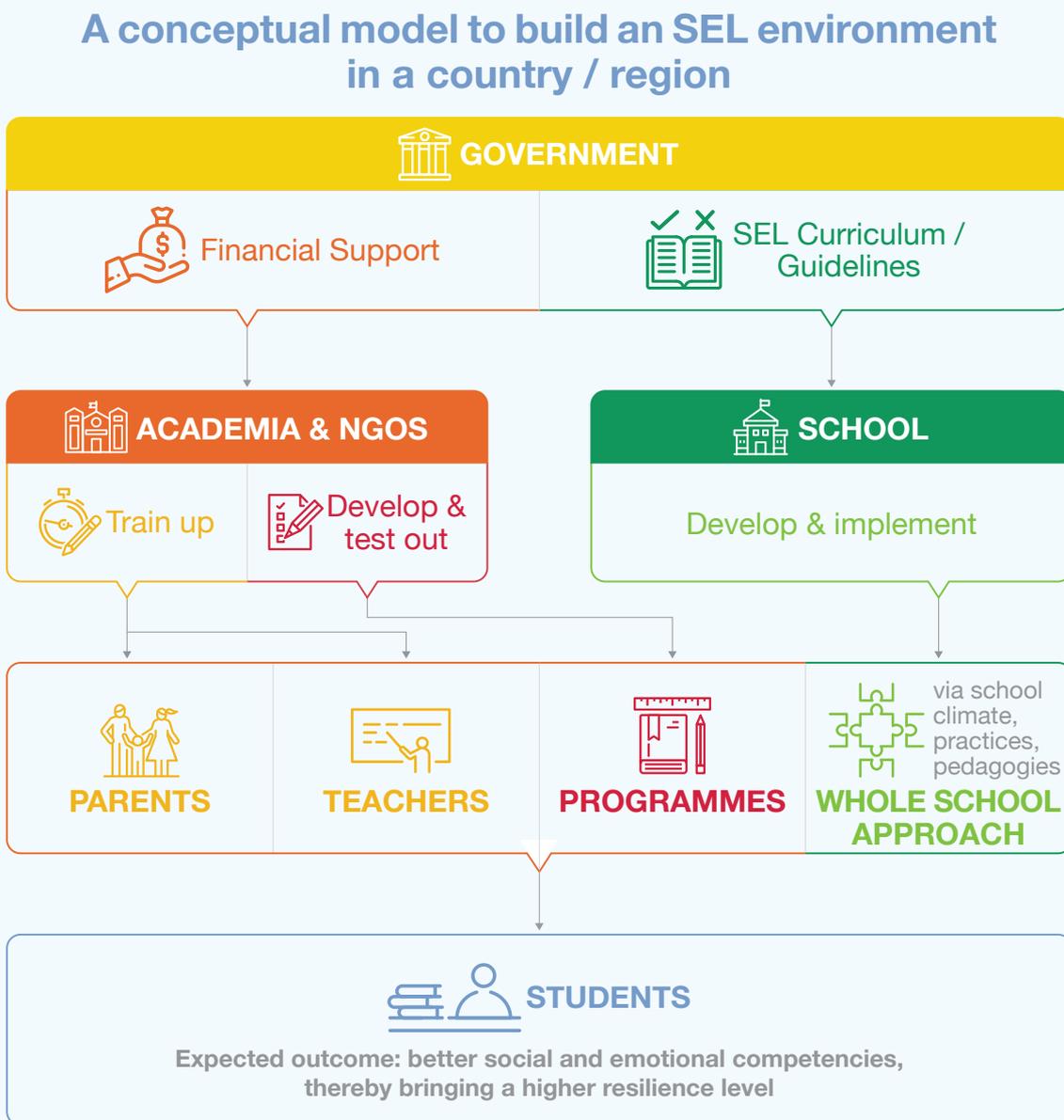
<sup>41</sup> EPISCenter. (n.d.). Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS).

- [online] Available at: <https://www.blueprintsprograms.org/resources/logic-model/PATHS.pdf>
- <sup>42</sup> Long, R. (2019). Personal, social, health and economic education in schools (England).  
[online] Available at: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7303>
- <sup>43</sup> Department of Education. (2019). Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education. Draft statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers.  
[online] Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/781150/Draft\\_guidance\\_Relationships\\_Education\\_\\_Relationships\\_and\\_Sex\\_Education\\_\\_RSE\\_\\_and\\_Health\\_Education2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/781150/Draft_guidance_Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE__and_Health_Education2.pdf)
- <sup>44</sup> Early Intervention Foundation. (2015). Social and Emotional Learning: Skills for Life and Work.  
[online] Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/411489/Overview\\_of\\_research\\_findings.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411489/Overview_of_research_findings.pdf)
- <sup>45</sup> Department of Education. (2010). Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme in secondary schools: national evaluation.  
[online] Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/181718/DFE-RR049.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181718/DFE-RR049.pdf)
- <sup>46</sup> Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007
- <sup>47</sup> Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007
- <sup>48</sup> GOV.UK. (2019). One of the largest mental health trials launches in schools.  
[online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/one-of-the-largest-mental-health-trials-launches-in-schools>
- <sup>49</sup> GOV.UK. (2019). One of the largest mental health trials launches in schools.  
[online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/one-of-the-largest-mental-health-trials-launches-in-schools>
- <sup>50</sup> OECD (2018). Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility.  
[online] Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/equity-in-education-9789264073234-en.htm> [Accessed 26 Sep. 2019].
- <sup>51</sup> Lähdemäki J. (2019) Case Study: The Finnish National Curriculum 2016—A Co-created National Education Policy. In: Cook J. (eds) Sustainability, Human Well-Being, and the Future of Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham
- <sup>52</sup> Valtonen, P. (2016). Finnish preschool children learn through play and joy.  
[online] Available at: <https://learningscoop.fi/finnish-preschool-children-learn-through-play-and-joy/>
- <sup>53</sup> Figueroa-Sánchez, M. (2008). Building emotional literacy: Groundwork to early learning. *Childhood Education*, 84(5), 301–304.  
[online] Available at <https://search-proquest-com.eproxy.lib.hku.hk/docview/210395347?accountid=14548>
- <sup>54</sup> Legislative Council Secretariat. (2014). Fact Sheet: Education System in Finland.  
[online] Available at: <https://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1314fsc40-education-system-in-finland-20140902-e.pdf>
- <sup>55</sup> European Commission. (2018). Guidance and Counselling in Early Childhood and School Education.  
[online] Available at: [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/finland/guidance-and-counselling-early-childhood-and-school-education\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/finland/guidance-and-counselling-early-childhood-and-school-education_en)
- <sup>56</sup> European Commission. (2018). Other Education Staff or Staff Working with Schools.  
[online] Available at: [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/finland/other-education-staff-or-staff-working-schools\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/finland/other-education-staff-or-staff-working-schools_en)
- <sup>57</sup> Mightifier. (n.d.).  
[online] Available at: <https://mightifier.com/benefits/>
- <sup>58</sup> HkedCity. (n.d.) Mightifier.  
[online] Available at: <https://www.hkedcity.net/ereap/zh-hant/mightifier>
- <sup>59</sup> <https://www.xedu.co/news/mightifier-licensed-to-scholastic>
- <sup>60</sup> XEdu. (2017). Mightifier licensed to the world's largest publisher and distributor of children's books.  
[online] Available at: <https://mightifier.com/press-release-mightifier-sunburst/>
- <sup>61</sup> Mightifier is mainly supported by XEdu, a Finnish education accelerator, at its prototype stage.
- <sup>62</sup> Other overarching objectives include: physical movement and health, cognitive skills, language, society, aesthetics sense.
- <sup>63</sup> Ministry of Education. (2017). Curriculum Guidelines of Preschool Activities.
- <sup>64</sup> Ministry of Education. (2014). 教育發展新契機—實驗教育三法。  
[online] Available at: [https://www.edu.tw/news\\_Content.aspx?n=9E7AC85F1954DDA8&s=C5AC6858C0DC65F3](https://www.edu.tw/news_Content.aspx?n=9E7AC85F1954DDA8&s=C5AC6858C0DC65F3)
- <sup>65</sup> Executive Yuan (行政院) of Taiwan. (2018). 《實驗教育法》三法修正—讓台灣教育創新更具動能。
- <sup>66</sup> United Daily News. (2018). 實驗教育大爆發 4年學生數成長2.5倍 校數增近20倍。  
[online] Available at: <https://udn.com/news/story/6656/3420816>
- <sup>67</sup> Wei Lai (未來) Family. (2018). 芯福里情緒教育推廣協會：有情緒困擾的孩子愈來愈多，學校教育更該幫助孩子提高EQ。  
[online] Available at: <https://gfamily.cwgv.com.tw/content/index/11823>
- <sup>68</sup> 親子天下. (2017). 學校沒教的EQ課芯福里來教，明年推廣至小一。  
[online] Available at: <https://flipedu.parenting.com.tw/article/3964>
- <sup>69</sup> Kom. (2011). Social and emotional education in Singapore. In: F.M. Botin (eds), *Social and emotional education: An international analysis*. Santander, Spain: Fundación Botin.
- <sup>70</sup> Ministry of Education. (n.d.). MOE Schools.  
[online] Available at: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/careers/executive-administrative/moe-schools>

## Chapter Key Takeaways

### 1. Stakeholders including governments, academia, NGOs, schools and parent all have a stake in the advocacy of SEL

In this chapter, it is observed that building an SEL-friendly environment requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders in society. The diagram below takes a macro-perspective to illustrate the function of each party and how they would affect the SEL development of students. Their roles are summarised as below:



As shown, stakeholders' roles are interdependent. Without the government's (financial) support, the academia and NGOs can hardly pool the resources needed to conduct evidence-based research and carry out programmes in schools. Similarly, schools cannot successfully implement SEL if teachers do not have the right pedagogical knowledge to deliver SEL education; teachers themselves also need to go through basic SEL training to understand how to manage their own emotions and communicate with students, that is, role-modelling. Therefore, to create an SEL-supportive environment, we should not only focus on the education system but also the whole society.

## 2. Drawing from international experience, there are three success factors for socially and emotionally competent students

If we take a closer look at the overseas examples, we find that there are three success factors for effective implementation of SEL: (1) social and emotional competencies as overarching education policy goals; (2) compulsory SEL measures (standalone subjects) or measures conducive to a positive school climate (whole-school approach); (3) room for SEL programmes and experimentation by other stakeholders outside the education system.

### Success factor 1: Social and emotional competencies as overarching education policy goals

- E.g. **Finland** (national curriculum)  
**The UK** (national curriculum)  
**Singapore** (national curriculum)  
**Taiwan** (kindergarten curriculum)  
**The US** (state-level curriculum e.g. Illinois)

### Success factor 2: Compulsory SEL measures (standalone subjects) or measures conducive to a positive school climate for teacher-student and peer relationship-building (whole-school approach)

E.g. **Finland**

- (1) Play-based learning for pre-primary children to develop learning-to-learn skills
- (2) Continuous care from the same class teacher in Grades 1 - 6
- (3) School teachers, counsellors, psychologists and nurses work closely together to monitor students' wellbeing

#### **The UK**

- (1) Reform of Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) to focus more on relationships education and introduce it as a compulsory subject as early as in primary schools
- (2) Teacher training includes social and emotional management

#### **Singapore**

- (1) Prototyping – a design process that requires schools to design SEL programmes
- (2) Teachers' training on SEL
- (3) Subjects (like English language) incorporating SEL
- (4) Requirements for schools to develop frameworks and tools to assess students' SEL outcomes

### Success factor 3: Room for SEL programmes and experimentation by other stakeholders outside the education system

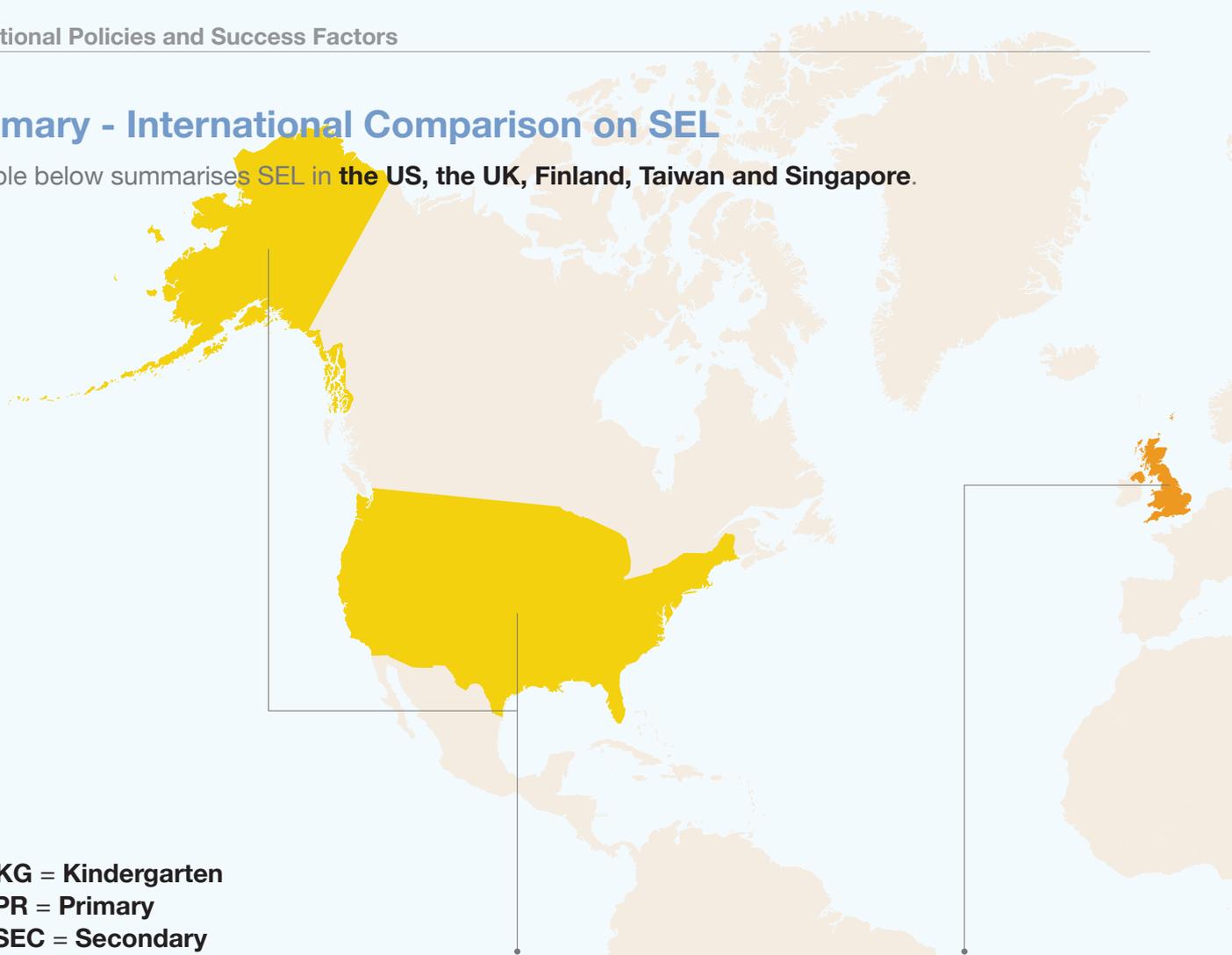
E.g. **The US** (NGO-led CASEL + PATHS)

**The UK** (SEAL)

**Taiwan** (Legislation allowing experimental education + parent-led happiness movement)

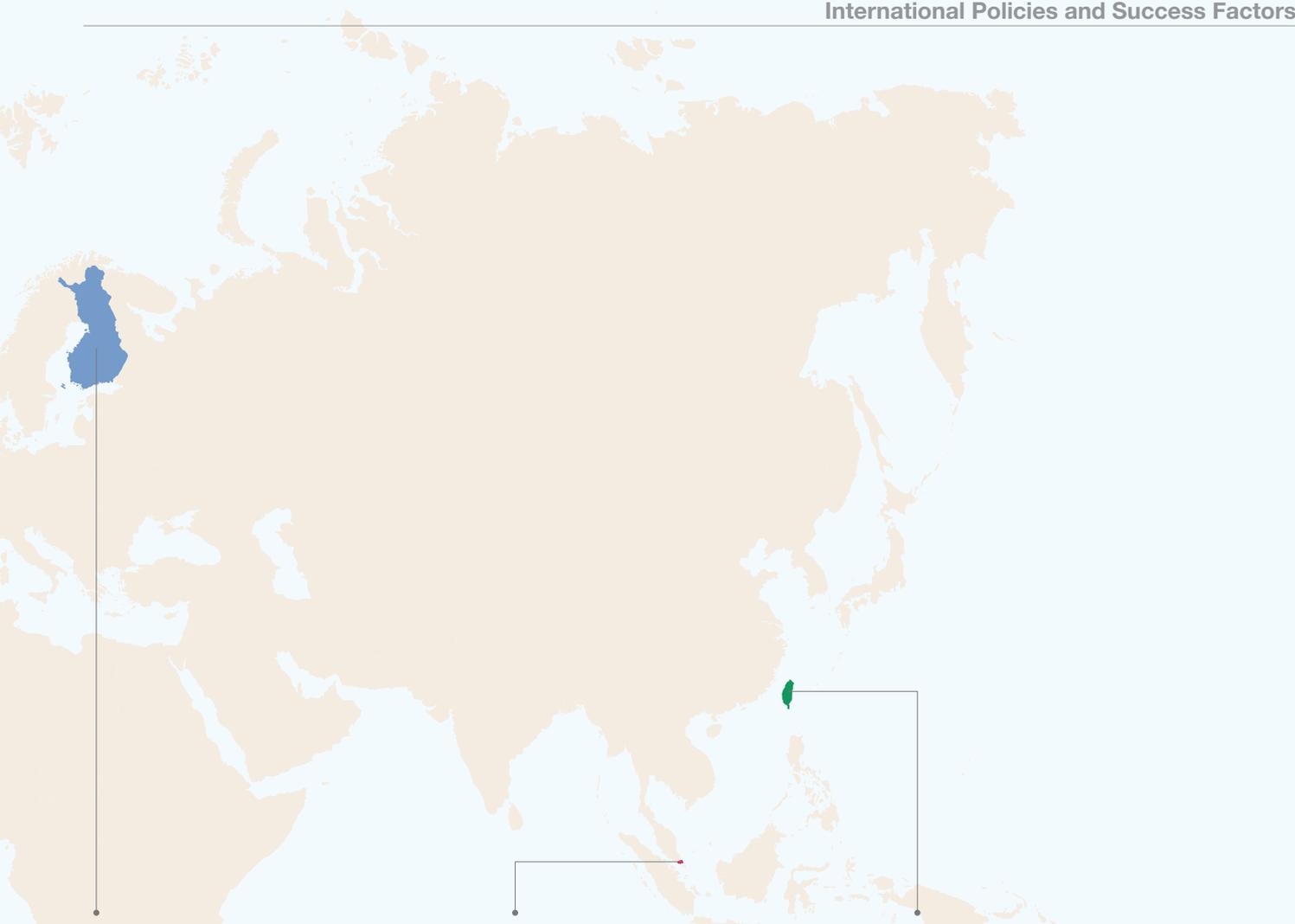
## Summary - International Comparison on SEL

The table below summarises SEL in the US, the UK, Finland, Taiwan and Singapore.



Note: **KG** = Kindergarten  
**PR** = Primary  
**SEC** = Secondary

		The United States	The United Kingdom
SEL as part of the basic education curriculum		<b>NO</b> (No national curriculum in the US) SEL included in some states, e.g. Illinois [PR and SEC]	<b>YES</b> National Curriculum [PR and SEC]
Compulsory SEL measures	Standalone subject	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b> (1) Relationships (and Sex) Education [PR and SEC] (2) Health Education [PR and SEC]
	Measures conducive to positive school climate (Whole-school approach)	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b> SEAL Programme: teacher training includes social and emotional management
Room for discretionary SEL programmes and experimentation	Guidelines or other supporting documents	<b>YES</b> (1) Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2) CASEL Framework	<b>NO</b>
	Programmes	<b>YES</b> PATHS	<b>YES (but discontinued)</b> Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme



	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Singapore</b>	<b>Taiwan</b>
	<b>YES</b> National Core Curriculum [Pre-PR, PR and SEC]	<b>YES</b> Framework for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Competencies and Student Outcomes [PR, SEC and Post-SEC]	<b>NO</b> Included only in the Curriculum Guidelines of Preschool Activities [KG only]
PR	<b>YES</b> Health Education [PR and SEC]	<b>YES</b> (1) Prototyping for schools to design SEL programmes (2) Teachers' training on SEL (3) Subjects (like English language) incor- porating SEL (4) Requirements for schools to develop frameworks and tools to assess SEL outcomes	<b>NO</b>
	<b>YES</b> (1) Play-based learning for pre-primary children (2) Same class teachers for primary students (3) School counsellors, psychologists and nurses work closely together to monitor students' wellbeing	<b>YES</b> Multi-pronged implementation plan for schools [PR, SEC and Post-SEC]	<b>NO</b>
	<b>NO</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b> Experimental Education [PR and Junior SEC]
	<b>NO</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b> Parent-led happiness Movement

# Analysis of the Existing Policies and School Support for Social and Emotional Education in Hong Kong

In light of the SEL success factors, this chapter takes a closer look at the situation of Hong Kong. How far are we lagging behind international standards? How can we improve our social and emotional education to achieve the ultimate goal of a higher level of resilience among students?

**1. In terms of policy requirements, Hong Kong’s education policy documents do not include social and emotional competencies as learning goals. As a result, what constitutes social and emotional competencies – and their significance and how to impart them – are not properly understood by practitioners.**

**“ Sometimes teachers confuse the idea of resilience or social and emotional competencies to the absence of psychological distress, and encourage students to be positive no matter what they face. But just imagine, how would it sound like if the student is going through life challenges or difficulties? ”**

Ms. Christine Mak, Clinical Psychologist in Hong Kong

Wellbeing, mental health and resilience is never an overarching curriculum goal. Similarly, there is little mention of social and emotional competencies or SEL in all levels (both primary and secondary) of Hong Kong’s curriculum, and neither the Education Bureau nor other stakeholders have published any guidelines or principles for SEL. Put simply, social and emotional competencies constitutes a minimal part of the curriculum. Comparing Hong Kong’s policy mentions of SEL and similar concepts to, for example, Finland’s (wherein students’ self-management and relationships skills are one of the seven core transversal competencies, taught in all subjects) or Singapore’s (wherein social and emotional competencies are in itself the main component and the prerequisite to other components, such as the acquisition of knowledge and skills), Hong Kong pales in comparison.

Below is a snapshot of the curriculum goals in Hong Kong that fall within the scope of this paper.

Level	Document	Mention(s)
Primary	Basic Education Curriculum Guide - To Sustain, Deepen and Focus on Learning to Learn (Primary 1 - 6) <sup>71</sup>	<b>1.5.2 Areas for Further Enhancement or Improvement</b>  Balancing students’ physical and mental development: “They (schools) can further strengthen the related learning experiences to help students develop a healthy and balanced lifestyle, including adopting a regular and resting habit, ..., and good mental health, etc.”
Secondary	Secondary Education Curriculum Guide - Learning Goals, School Curriculum Framework and Planning <sup>72</sup>	Students are expected to equip themselves with knowledge, generic skills and values through the secondary curriculum.  9 generic skills are proposed. One of them is self-management skills, which is a nine-element skill set that includes self-worth goal setting and tracking, decision making, confidence, resilience and adaptability, appropriate expression of emotions, managing resources, keeping promises to others, self-discipline and reflective practice.

As a result, SEL experts in Hong Kong (including psychologists and social workers) have reflected that the understanding and discussion in Hong Kong of resilience and related concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, and positive psychology, have been too superficial. Positive psychology is often reduced to the idea of being positive no matter what, and educators use this as a quick fix regardless of the student’s circumstances, including students who display problematic behaviours and need more serious interventions. At the same time, much focus is placed on introducing extra activities that are branded as positive education or wellbeing activities, while teachers generally lack the time and energy to build and sustain quality relationships with students.

**“ If the education sector retains the problem-fixing mindset to deal with students’ social and emotional wellbeing, social and emotional development of our students will always lag behind and be a problem for their personal growth. ”**

Ms. Rita Ching, Founder of Above and Beyond Education

Still, despite the lack of mentioning of social and emotional competencies in the curriculum, one should note that the EDB has provided a self-evaluation tool known as APASO for schools to gauge students’ development needs in social and affective domains, and assess the effectiveness of related programmes in schools starting from 2003. Although it is an optional exercise, APASO is widely adopted by schools as a tool to inform their policy and management decisions.

<sup>71</sup> Education Bureau. (2014). Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–6). [online] Available at: <https://cd.edb.gov.hk/becg/english/chapter1.html#s1.3>

<sup>72</sup> Education Bureau. (2017). Learning Goals, School Curriculum Framework and Planning. Secondary Education Curriculum Guide. [online] Available at: [https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/renewal/Guides/SECG%20booklet%202\\_en\\_20180831.pdf](https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/renewal/Guides/SECG%20booklet%202_en_20180831.pdf)

**2. In terms of educational practices among schools in Hong Kong, social and emotional competencies are not taught as an independent (or a substantial part of a) subject. Indeed, prevailing practices, based on the Guidelines on Student Discipline<sup>73</sup> and focused on disciplinary methods, contradict the spirit and substance of SEL (creating a whole-school environment that is conducive to relationship-building).**

Only primary students receive compulsory Personal Growth Education<sup>74</sup>. Depending on school-based situations, certain social and self-management skills are taught. However, the situation is quite similar to PSHE in the UK before the curriculum update, in that the scope of the syllabus is broad, which makes SE-related competencies a minimal part of the subject. At the secondary level, social and emotional competencies are not extensively covered in academic subjects.

The previous chapter has illustrated the importance of a positive whole-school environment for SEL, which starts from a trusting relationship and open communications between teachers and students. In Hong Kong, most schools apply the Guidelines on Student Discipline published by the Education Bureau to manage student misbehaviours and conflicts. As reflected in our interviews with practitioners, the outcome and spirit of disciplinary policies (behaviour-management achieved through stoicism and the suppression of emotions) are not conducive to relationship-building, which is at the core of SEL.

**“ Given our increased understanding and emphasis on students’ wellbeing, disciplinary policies should focus more on empathy and communications rather than punishments. That’s why we introduced some changes in the disciplinary policy to keep up with the times, thereby encouraging students’ positive growth. ”**

Ms. Cheung Wai Ching, Former Principal of St. Bonaventure Catholic Primary School

On a related note, teachers’ awareness and capacity-building in SEL are also important, as shown by the practices in the US, the UK and Singapore. In Hong Kong, SEL (and its related concepts) are not the graduate requirement for initial teacher trainings in universities. Courses such as “Supporting Students with Emotional & Behavioural Challenges” and “School Guidance and Counselling” are often elective studies<sup>75</sup>, meaning that it is totally up to pre-teachers’ decision to take the course or not. Professional development trainings are also not mandatory.

The upshot is that, within formal school-based education in Hong Kong, at least as far as policy documents are concerned, schools are not required to provide many learning opportunities for students to acquire social and emotional competencies for students.

**3. There is little room for SEL programmes and experimentation outside of the education system. Positive Psychology initiatives are encouraged but outcomes are unclear.**

**a) SEL**

Some schools participate voluntarily in experimental learning activities, like the Understanding Adolescent Project (UAP), and the PATHS programmes developed by the US – both programmes have SEL elements. Some schools also introduce SEL programmes to students at their discretion, and outsource such services to service-providers like NGOs. Yet, the room for schools to participate in such voluntary activities is limited due to a lack of class time and tight teaching schedules, as noted in the following examples.

**EXAMPLE 1**

In 2014, a study evaluated the effect of an SEL programme for primary school students who have difficulties in social and emotional management.<sup>76</sup> 27 primary school students were recruited and randomly assigned to the treatment group (n = 14) and the control group (n = 13). The treatment group joined a six-session SEL programme and each session lasted for 1 hour. It was found that the SEL programme significantly reduced problem behaviours in the treatment group (p = .008), but not in the control group. However, a limitation noted in the study was that the intervention time was not long enough due to a lack of class time.

**EXAMPLE 2**

A pilot study of a reduced version of the PATHS curriculum, a US-developed evidence-based SEL programme, was conducted in 3 elementary schools in Hong Kong, involving 316 primary one students<sup>77</sup>. Adapted and translated into Chinese, the lessons dealt with the more basic emotions and the topic of self-control. Each lesson lasted for 35 minutes and the activities included group discussion, role-play, art activities, stories, and educational games. 12 teachers were trained for 2 days and adopted PATHS lessons in their teaching. After 4 months, students showed improvement in emotions understanding and regulation, and prosocial behaviour. The effects of the intervention varied among schools, partly due to differences in the degree of implementation (i.e. the number of lessons and lesson time) and principal support, which was critical. The study demonstrated that overseas SEL programmes, if adapted to a local context, can be taught with positive results, but there needs to have support from school leadership and a willingness to allocate time for extra-curricular activities.

<sup>73</sup> Education Bureau. (n.d.). Guidelines on Student Discipline.

[online] Available at: <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/teacher/student-guidance-discipline-services/principles-guidelines/guidelines-on-student-discipline/index.html>

<sup>74</sup> A minimum of 12 periods, each lasts for about 30 minutes, is allocated to PGE for each primary level per school year.

<sup>75</sup> The Education University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Secondary).

[online] Available at: [https://www.eduhk.hk/acadprog/pgde/PGDE\\_Sec.htm#List](https://www.eduhk.hk/acadprog/pgde/PGDE_Sec.htm#List)

<sup>76</sup> Agnes S.K. Wong, Cecilia W.P. Li-Tsang\*, Andrew M.H. Siu, Effect of A Social Emotional Learning Programme For Primary School Students. *Hong Kong Journal of Occupational Therapy* (2014) 24, 56–63.

Retrieved at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hkjot.2014.11.001>

<sup>77</sup> Kam, C. M., Wong, L. W. L., & Fung, K. M. S. (2011). Promoting social-emotional learning in Chinese schools: A feasibility study of PATHS implementation in Hong Kong. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 3(1), 30–47.

Our interviews with principals, teachers and practitioners revealed the same problem as above. That is not to say that none of the schools in Hong Kong has introduced activities related to resilience building or SEL activities for students; however, this requires the vision and will of a particular principal to catalyse the progress in schools. Our interviewees stated that there are not many schools who have done the same at their own expense. Listed below is a good example of an exceptional school with great principal leadership:

### EXAMPLE 3

In the academic year 18/19, Just Feel, a social enterprise that promotes SEL and compassionate communication conducted a one-year SEL pilot programme with St. Bonaventure Catholic Primary School. With the principal's support, the school was able to embrace the whole-school approach for SEL and implemented teachers' training sessions and co-learning groups, form-teacher classes (held once per month), interest classes, parents' workshops, as well as setting up game booths, compassionate communication corners, display boards in the school. With limited resources, no study was published after the programme. Still, the school concluded that the successful implementation of SEL/compassionate communication is greatly dependent on the (1) available training sessions and support for teachers and parents, (2) sufficiency of teaching resources and (3) an explicitly-outlined schedule and enough time for communication between teachers and students.

## b) Positive Psychology

In response to reports of student wellbeing issues and suicides, there has been an encouraging surge in popularity in positive psychology initiatives. For example, some schools have actually trialled to have positive education classes during lesson time and rebuilt their school environment with positive psychology elements<sup>78</sup>; some also had 3-minute mindfulness sessions held with students every day during morning assemblies<sup>79</sup>.

The examples actually proved that the Government measures are essential in promoting a positive school environment. Since 2016, the Government has initiated the Joyful @ School Initiative<sup>80</sup> to promote mental health awareness and understanding among students. Other than that, the Quality Education Fund also prioritised the theme "Healthy Lifestyle and Positive Development of Students" in their funding<sup>81</sup>. Although expert interviewees noted that it is unclear whether the programmes held are effective, and whether they are based on a proper understanding of social and emotional competencies, such measures could at least bring schools together to create a positive learning environment for students.

<sup>78</sup> Education Bureau. (2017). Awarded Teaching Practices Repository. Chief Executive's Award for Teaching Excellence. [online] Available at: [https://www.ate.gov.hk/english/tp\\_1617\\_GD02.html](https://www.ate.gov.hk/english/tp_1617_GD02.html)

<sup>79</sup> Wong. (2018). 【快樂練習課·二】校長帶起靜觀 給孩子一顆真心做真人. HK01.

<sup>80</sup> Education Bureau. (2016). Joyful @ School.

[online] Available at: <https://www.edb.gov.hk/tc/edu-system/special/resources/joyfulatschool/joyful.html>

<sup>81</sup> Quality Education Fund. (2016). Quality Education Fund: Guide to Applicants.



The SEL pilot programme held by Just Feel in St. Bonaventure Catholic Primary School in the academic year 18/19, as illustrated in Example 3.

# Conclusion and the Way Forward

Applying the success factors drawn from international experience, we found that Hong Kong lags behind in social and emotional education in all aspects.

Success Factors	Hong Kong
1) Do education policy documents include social and emotional competencies as overarching learning goals?	Limited. There is minimal mention of social and emotional competencies.
2) (i) Are social and emotional competencies taught as an independent subject, or part of it?  (ii) Are there other compulsory measures conducive to a school climate for teacher-student and peer relationship building (i.e. whole-school approach)?	(i) Yes - but as part of a very broad curriculum.  (ii) No - disciplinary practices run counter to the whole-school approach of relationship-building.
3) Is there room for SEL programmes and experimentation by other stakeholders outside of the education system?	Limited. Some schools introduced the EDB Understanding Adolescent Project, or participated in SEL and related programmes (such as positive psychology and mindfulness courses).

Policymakers, education practitioners and other stakeholders are encouraged to review these shortcomings of Hong Kong’s landscape and consider possible ways of remedy.

## Possible steps of remedy to be considered

### **Step 1: Engage all stakeholders to gain a consensus regarding the importance of social and emotional education**

In strategising the way forward, this paper urges all stakeholders, including the Government, academia, NGOs, schools, teachers and parents to deliberate together. The success of other countries/regions in SEL is based on measures appropriate for their circumstances and also on stakeholders having a consensus on the importance of social and emotional education and their incentives aligned, such that the implementation will achieve the intended outcomes and not deviate from the original goals. The discourse among stakeholders will eventually shape the direction development, say whether change should be effected from the top-down (as in Finland, the UK and Singapore) or from the bottom-up (as in Taiwan).



### **Step 2: Formulate explicit policies that promote social and emotional competencies as an educational goal**

Social and emotional competencies should be given a more prominent role in Hong Kong's education system. Examples from the UK, Finland, Singapore and Taiwan illustrated how their curriculum encourages the constant teaching, studying and assessment of such competencies. The explicit policies would also empower other stakeholders including NGOs and practitioners to foster a positive learning environment for youth.



### **Steps 3 & 4: Bring in favourable factors to build an SEL-friendly school environment**

It is too early to decide if the structuring of social and emotional education as a standalone subject would be feasible, as whether or not the setup of an independent subject requires consensus among the education sector. Still, certain measures, such as relieving teachers' administrative burden, having more teachers' entry and continued training on SEL and related programmes, and allowing more room and class time for experimentation and implementation of related learning experiences, would help encourage teachers to build quality relationships with students, thereby creating positive school environments.

## Action Recommendations

Steps 1-3 above require real change from all stakeholders. Summarised from this paper, the following actions should be considered –

### The Government should:

- Incorporate social and emotional competencies as the key learning goals of the curriculum
- Issue recommended theoretical frameworks, teaching guidelines, and self-evaluation tools for teachers to impart on social and emotional competencies in class
- Advise schools to deliver classes and implement measures (e.g. programmes, practices) related to students' development of social and emotional resilience
- Revise the terms that are out-of-date and contradictive to the spirit and substance of SEL in EDB's Guidelines on Student Discipline
- Provide (financial) support to the academia, NGOs and schools to carry out social and emotional education in the society
- Revisit existing graduate requirements for to-be-teachers and provide professional development sessions for current teachers on the delivery of resilience-building, SEL, positive education in class

### Schools should:

- Deliver classes and implement measures (e.g. programmes, practices) that are related to students' development of social and emotional resilience
- Discuss internally on whether the school's disciplinary policies are contradictive to the spirit and substance of SEL
- Participate in resilience-building, SEL and positive psychology trials and experimental learning activities held by NGOs and the academia
- Restructure teaching schedules to allow time for students' development of social and emotional competencies
- Relieve teachers' administrative burden so that they could focus on building meaningful and in-depth relationships with students

### Teachers should:

- Act as role models in demonstrating the good qualities in social and emotional aspects, such as managing well their own emotions and building meaningful and in-depth relationships with students
- Take an active role in equipping knowledge related to social and emotional education pedagogies. Participate in professional development workshops

### The academia should:

- Conduct evaluation studies on resilience-building, SEL and positive psychology programmes in schools, to inform programme designs, teaching practices, school policies and even government policies

**NGOs and related practitioners should:**

- Conduct pilot- and evidence-based programmes with schools
- Equip teachers with the pedagogical knowledge in delivering social and emotional education in schools

**Parents should:**

- Act as role models in demonstrating the good qualities in social and emotional aspects, such as managing well their own emotions and building meaningful and in-depth relationships with their children
- Take an active role in equipping knowledge related to resilience, SEL and positive psychology. Participate in related parenting workshops
- Build meaningful and in-depth relationships with their kids since their early childhood

## Way Forward

This paper also views early childhood intervention as an essential theme of SEL. Stakeholders are encouraged to further explore with the following directions –

First, noting that social and emotional resilience of youth is affected by a wide context of surrounding factors, it is suggested that any future research be in the direction of advocacy and capacity-building for people around pre-primary students, especially parents and teachers. Both play a key role in early SEL education as pre-primary education is usually less strictly controlled by the government, and is seldom part of the basic education in countries. The higher awareness among parents and teachers, the more likely a quality SEL education could be delivered at an early stage.

Second, early childhood intervention emerged as a theme that is understudied in the context of SEL in Hong Kong. It is hoped that there will be longitudinal studies in Hong Kong on SEL for children and its long-term outcomes on youth, as the basis for early childhood practices.

## List of Expert Interviewees

Category	Name	Background
<b>SEL Practitioners</b>	Ms. Rita Ching	Founder of Above and Beyond Education, a social enterprise that practices positive psychology and SEL in primary schools in Hong Kong
	Ms. Christine Mak	Clinical Psychologist in Hong Kong
	Mr. Raymond Yang and Mr. Matthew Kwok	Co-founder of Just Feel, a social enterprise that promotes compassionate communication under SEL
<b>Scholars</b>	Prof. Chiu Chi Yue	Dean of Social Science, the Chinese University of Hong Kong
	Prof. Eric Chen	Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry, The University of Hong Kong
<b>School Principals</b>	Ms. Cheung Wai Ching	Former Principal of St. Bonaventure Catholic Primary School
	Ms. Wong Kok Yee	Principal of Ma On Shan St. Joseph's Secondary School
	Mr. Ha Man Leung	Principal of Po Leung Kuk Ma Kam Ming College
<b>Education Innovators</b>	Ms. Tracy Chan	Executive Director, Ednovators
	Mr. Arnold Chan	Founder and CEO, Teach for Hong Kong
	Ms. Serena Fan	Founder and Executive Director, Hong Kong Children's Discovery Museum



## About Us



Thought Leadership on Youth Development

MWYO is an independent think tank that focuses on youth issues in Hong Kong. Our work spans across research studies and surveys, advocacy and education, and training and capacity building. We actively engage and work with everyone who has a stake in the positive outcome of young people's development: youth, parents, headmasters, teachers, social workers, employers, civil society leaders, governments, and political parties. Our mission is to be a thought leader in all aspects of youth development in Hong Kong.

### Acknowledgement

MWYO would like to thank all education leaders, scholars, principals, teachers and youth workers for their participation and input at the research-writing process. Their advices were crucial to the successful completion of the study.

### Key Contributor

Mr. Ambrose Wong | Researcher

✉ ambrose.wong@mwyo.org

#### Contact

Ms. Jess Lam

☎ +852 2508 5178

☎ +852 9550 8018

✉ jess.lam@mwyo.org

Mr. Alan Tse

☎ +852 2508 5177

☎ +852 9736 9067

✉ alan.tse@mwyo.org

### Social & Emotional Resilience of Youth in Hong Kong

[https://mwyo.org/index.php/zh-HK/analyses/youth\\_resilience](https://mwyo.org/index.php/zh-HK/analyses/youth_resilience)



### Stay tuned for MWYO's latest news

🌐 mwyo.org



📘 facebook  
MWYO





